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Anne Lind
The Role of Fictional Narratives in
Adolescent Identity Formation: A
Theoretical Exploration

ABSTRACT

This theoretical study explores the ways in which adolescents' engagement with fictional narratives can support developmental processes of identity formation and individuation. The purpose of the study was to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the intense relationship that some adolescents have with favorite books, movies, and television shows. A review of the literature on the psychology of fiction showed that, when deeply engaged with a narrative, readers are able to simulate characters' experiences in ways that lead to changes in behavior, empathy, and self-concept. A review of the literature on parasocial relationships showed that readers and viewers often form relationships with fictional characters that are similar to real-life social relationships. Two theories – self psychology and Winnicott's concept of transitional experience – were applied. These theoretical lenses helped to elucidate the ways that taking on the experiences of, or forming relationships with fictional characters can influence adolescents' processes of identity formation and individuation. Attention was given to the implications of such a framework for clinical work with adolescents. Additionally, recommendations were made for further research.

**THE ROLE OF FICTIONAL NARRATIVES IN ADOLESCENT IDENTITY
FORMATION: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2015

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.”
James Baldwin

Throughout human history, stories have helped us to make meaning out of our lives, to tie together the threads of the past, present, and future. Group identity is often based around shared myths, oral histories, or religious texts. Stories resonate on the individual level as well. A work of fiction has the potential to change the way the reader sees herself and her place in the world. In this theoretical study I focus on the ways that adolescents, in particular, engage with fictional narratives. The purpose of this study is to describe a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship that some adolescents have with favored narratives, and the role those narratives may play in navigating central developmental tasks of adolescence.

My interest in this topic was inspired by my experience as a clinical social work intern at a therapeutic school, where I worked with a group of 15 middle school students who struggled with a variety of behavioral and emotional challenges. Like many teenagers, the students I worked with were obsessed with popular culture. Their obsessions often took the form of a favorite novel, comic book, movie, or television show. The characters in these stories and the fictional worlds they inhabited held a place of great importance in their inner lives.

For example, I worked with was a 12-year-old girl named Margaret who was infatuated with the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins (2008, 2009, 2010). Margaret had missed significant portions of her 6th grade year due to school refusal and had been referred to the school by her home school district. While Margaret was dealing with major challenges at home, she refused to speak in her daily group therapy sessions, or in larger community meetings. At times she left her academic classes and came into the therapists' office, overwhelmed and anxious, but was never able to verbalize her feelings. The supervising therapists labeled Margaret as "resistant to treatment" due to her seeming inability to access the therapeutic elements of the program, and questioned whether the school was an appropriate placement for her.

Over the course of my eight-month internship, I tried time and time again to forge a connection with Margaret. In addition to group therapy sessions, I saw her in the milieu throughout the school day. At the end of each day, the students would return to their homerooms prior to dismissal. I often sat with Margaret while she waited for her bus to arrive. It was during these times that I experienced a few brief moments of connection with her, all of which centered on the *Hunger Games*. Margaret always carried one of the three books in her backpack; she would read them in order, and then start over at the beginning. One day I told her that I loved the books as well. We talked about which book was the best, our favorite characters, and whether we thought the movies lived up to the books. In these conversations she said more than I had ever heard her say to another adult. I relished these fleeting glimpses into Margaret's inner life. I suspected there was a reason for her devotion to this particular story and its characters, and I wondered if I might bring this into the therapy somehow. I wanted to find a way to work with adolescent clients like Margaret by connecting their passion for their favorite stories with the

challenges they were facing in their lives. Through this study I hope to provide a theoretical understanding of relationships like the one Margaret had with *The Hunger Games*.

Gaps in the Literature

A review of the literature on the topic of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives found that there is very little available research on the topic. A small, but significant body of research in social psychology (Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson, 2009; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Oatley, 1994, 1999) focused on the psychology of fiction, investigating the specific cognitive and emotional processes (such as empathy and identification) through which the reader is impacted by fictional narratives. However, none of these studies focused specifically on adolescents. A few empirical studies (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013; Polleck, 2011; Shechtman, 2006) looked at the efficacy of bibliotherapy interventions with adolescent populations, but offered only a limited theoretical grounding and explanation of *why* such an intervention might be of particular use with adolescent clients. As such, in this analysis I have chosen to focus not on the clinical intervention of using fictional narratives in therapy with adolescents, but rather on establishing a theoretical framework to inform such interventions that takes into account adolescents' particular developmental needs.

Relevance to Clinical Social Work

In the therapeutic school where I was an intern, the emphasis in therapy was on students "working on their issues." Discussion of other topics, such as imagination or fantasy, that were not seen as directly related to these "issues", was frequently dismissed as being a distraction, or even a waste of time within the daily group therapy sessions. As a social work intern, I struggled to reconcile this approach with the essential social work principle of "person-in-environment." If the concept of environment can be thought to include the media that one consumes as well as the

fictional worlds in which one immerses oneself, then an understanding of a client's favorite books, movies or television shows can play an important role in the worker's holistic assessment of the client. This is true for clients of any age. However, given the particular developmental concerns of adolescence, clinicians may find that exploration of fictional narratives can provide a helpful platform for exploring issues of identity and individuation. Use of fictional narratives may also be useful when working with adolescents who are resistant to, or difficult to engage in therapy (Shechtman, 2006). Working with displacement, by discussing a narrative rather than directly addressing the client's feelings or behavior, can create a sense of safety that lessens defensiveness and allows for greater freedom of expression.

Favorite books, movies, music, and video games often serve as a means of defining oneself and of connecting with peers. For social workers who work with adolescents, engaging with these elements of popular culture can serve as a way of "meeting the client where they are." Adults often trivialize adolescents' interest in popular culture. However, from a strengths-based perspective, it is necessary to take an interest in what adolescent clients define as important to their lives. If the narratives of popular culture can be thought of as a *lingua franca* of youth (Mattingly, 2006), then being able to speak this language is crucial. Indeed, it can be a way of providing "culturally competent service delivery" which is one of the standards that have been set out by the National Association of Social Workers for working with adolescents (NASW, 1993).

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives through the lens of two branches of psychoanalytic theory – object relations and self psychology, and to establish a theoretical framework to guide further research as well as clinical work with adolescents. In the next chapter I will describe the theoretical orientation and

methodological approach of this study. In Chapter 3, I will define the scope of the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives by integrating an examination of theories of adolescent development with an overview of the literature on the psychology of fiction. In Chapter 4, I present an overview of Winnicottian object relations with particular attention to the concept of *transitional experience*, while Chapter 5 explores the concepts central to Kohutian self psychology. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will analyze the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives through the lens of both of these theories and consider the implications for clinical work and further research.

CHAPTER II

Conceptualization and Methodology

In this chapter I will provide a conceptual overview for the chapters that follow. This study seeks to establish a theoretical framework for understanding the ways that adolescents engage with fictional narratives. The study is guided by the following questions: 1) How can we explain the relationship that some adolescents have with favored fictional narratives? 2) How do the developmental tasks of adolescence, including individuation and identity formation, inform the ways that adolescents relate to these narratives? 3) What internal processes are at play when adolescents engage with fictional narratives? 4) What are the implications for clinical work with adolescents of a richer understanding of these processes? In later chapters I will explore these questions through two distinct theoretical frameworks: Winnicottian object relations, and Kohutian self psychology. This chapter will briefly introduce these theories, as well as discuss the biases and limitations of this study.

Theoretical Orientation

I have chosen to use psychoanalytic theory to explore the role of fictional narratives in adolescent development. Beginning with Freud, psychoanalytic theory has focused largely on intrapsychic processes; those processes, both conscious and unconscious, that occur within an individual's mind. Later developments in psychoanalysis, including the work of Winnicott and Kohut, expanded psychoanalytic theory by integrating an understanding of the effects of the external social world on internal processes (Mitchell & Black, 1995). I chose to use

psychoanalytic theories in this study because of their applicability to the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narrative – a phenomenon that is located at the intersection of adolescents’ internal and external worlds. In the following chapters I will explore the cognitive and emotional processes that take place in one’s mind while engaged with fictional narratives, and the impact of these processes on internal working models of self and other, as well on the social tasks of identity formation and individuation that are associated with adolescence. The two theories that I use to guide my analysis both exist under the umbrella of psychoanalytic theory, but are sufficiently distinct as to offer complementary ways of approaching the questions I have presented above.

Winnicott and transitional experience.

The first theoretical concept I will employ in my analysis is that of *transitional experience* as defined by Donald Woods Winnicott. A major figure in the British Object Relations School of psychoanalysis, Winnicott focused much of his research on the dynamic interactions between infants and their primary caregivers. He theorized that an optimal transition from the pure subjectivity of infancy to a relatively objectively oriented reality was crucial for healthy development (Mitchell & Black, 1995). A transitional object, such as a favored toy to which the child is attached, serves as a physical manifestation of this transition, bridging the physical and psychic space between the child and the caregiver. Eventually the child grows out of the need for this object; however, navigation between internal and external experience persists throughout the life course, reflected in transitional experience (Winnicott, 1953). Winnicott (1967) named play, psychotherapy, and all manner of cultural experiences as examples of transitional experience, “located” within the potential space between subjective/internal and objective/external reality.

Self psychology.

Self psychology is a branch of psychoanalytic thinking developed by Heinz Kohut. Originally conceived of as a way of understanding and treating narcissistic patients who Kohut felt could not be successfully treated using traditional psychoanalytic technique (Mitchell & Black, 1995), self psychology has since been applied in a variety of clinical settings and populations. At the core of Kohut's theory is the idea that a child's development of a cohesive sense of self is dependent on empathic responsiveness from his or her caregivers. In particular, he identified three types of *selfobjects*, which ideally fulfill the needs of the *tripolar self*: the mirroring selfobject, who validates the child's healthy grandiosity and sense of specialness; the idealized selfobject, who serves as a strong, competent other in which the child can find safety; and the twinship selfobject, who provides the child with a sense that there are others like her and she is not "alone in the world" (Flanagan, 2011b). Through a process Kohut (1978) called *transmuting internalization*, elements of the selfobject are taken in and synthesized in the creation of a core sense of self. Although much of Kohut's work focused on selfobject use during childhood, he believed that individuals continue to seek out selfobjects throughout their lives (Baker & Baker, 1987). As we mature, the circle of available selfobjects expands beyond our immediate caregivers to include friends, romantic partners, and even symbols, ideas, and works of art and literature.

Plan for Analysis

In Chapter 6, I will integrate concepts from the two theories described above to outline a theoretical framework for understanding adolescent engagement with fictional narratives. Each theory contributes to this understanding in different but complementary ways. Winnicott's concept of transitional experience is useful in framing the ways that both internal and external

reality contribute to the cognitive and emotional processes that take place when one is reading, or otherwise engaged with a fictional narrative. Much like childhood play, reading allows for an exploration of the world and the self that is neither completely subjective nor objective. Self psychology, and particularly the concept of the selfobject, provides a way of conceptualizing how fictional narratives may serve a function in the process of identity formation. Fictional characters can serve as selfobjects, providing needed mirroring, idealization or twinship that can then be incorporated into an adolescent's developing identity. When the selfobjects found in fiction are sufficiently different from those that are available within an adolescent's family or immediate community, they may play a role in the individuation process. After outlining this integrative analysis, I will discuss the potential for applying this theoretical framework in clinical work with adolescents.

Potential Author Biases

My interest in this topic is shaped by two personal experiences. The first is my lifelong love of reading. Books were important to me throughout my childhood and adolescence, and I believe that the relationship I had with my favorite stories and characters played a role in shaping the person I became. My ability to deeply engage with fictional narratives was shaped by my privileged sociocultural location. I grew up in an upper-middle class household where leisure activities such as reading were possible and encouraged. My parents bought me books and read to me from a young age. I attended well-funded schools that employed full-time librarians and had extensive libraries full of books in my native language. Without significant intellectual or learning challenges, reading came easily and was therefore enjoyable to me. I recognize that the exposure to and engagement with fiction that I experienced is by no means universal.

The second experience that led me to undertake this study is that of working with adolescents in a therapeutic setting, many of whom were deeply engaged with their favorite books, movies, and television shows. I was motivated to better understand this relationship as a means to strengthen our therapeutic alliance and connect with an important part of their inner worlds. Those adolescents inspired this study. However, the anecdotal experiences of a handful of individuals in a specific setting do not define a generalizable phenomenon. Therefore, throughout this study, I have tried to maintain a focus on understanding the importance of fictional narratives for adolescents who *do* engage with them, rather than implying that fictional narratives are important to *all* adolescents.

Throughout this paper I focus on books and reading while also acknowledging other types of fictional narratives including those in film and television. This bias towards literature reflects my own personal bias as well as that of the current literature. The majority of empirical research on the psychology of fiction (which will be described in the following chapter) focuses on the unique experience of reading. While similarities likely exist in the experience of engaging with fiction across media, the findings of those studies are not directly transferable to the experience of a visual medium such as film. Despite the growing popularity of young adult fiction in recent years, adolescent literacy rates in the United States remain low according to a variety of measures (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). I acknowledge that by focusing on literature, this study does not necessarily reflect the experience of adolescents who do not (or cannot) enjoy reading, but do have an engaged relationship with a favored film or television narrative.

Strengths and Limitations

The phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives has been mostly overlooked in the social sciences literature as evidenced by the relative scarcity of empirical studies that look specifically at adolescents and the ways they relate to, and are impacted by fiction. The nascent state of this area of research lends it to a theoretical exploration of the topic. A strength of the theoretical methodology is that it allows me to draw from diverse bodies of literature, including social psychology, clinical research on adolescent populations, literary theory, and psychoanalytic theory, in order to provide a richer, more layered understanding of the phenomenon. I hope that this exploration leads to the creation of a theoretical foundation on which to base future empirical research. In Chapter 6, I make some suggestions for further research.

Despite the strengths of a theoretical methodology, this study has a number of limitations. First, by nature a theoretical analysis does not lead to generalizable conclusions. Second, the study has a limited scope in terms of the theories employed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, two psychoanalytic theories were chosen due to their relevance in conceptualizing a phenomenon influenced by both intrapsychic processes and external forces. However, the exclusion of other potentially useful theoretical lenses (i.e. narrative theory or feminist theory), limits the depth of the resulting analysis.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge the biases inherent in the theories this study employs. Psychoanalytic theory, like many social and psychological theories, is rooted in the values of a western, white-dominated, patriarchal culture, which emphasizes individuality, separation from one's family of origin, and the formation of a new family through heterosexual marriage as the hallmarks of adulthood. Therefore, it is important to note that these theories are

not always the most useful in helping to understand how factors such as class, race, gender, and culture may impact one's experience. Regrettably, the limited scope of this study does not allow for a nuanced exploration of the ways that these factors influence the adolescent experience. As a result, my discussion of adolescence may imply a homogeneity that does not reflect the lived experiences of many adolescents.

In the next chapter, I will explore in depth the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives.

CHAPTER III

Adolescent Engagement with Fictional Narratives

In this chapter I will explore adolescent engagement with fictional narratives. In later chapters this phenomenon will be examined through the lens of two different psychoanalytic theories. In order to define the phenomenon to be studied, I have broken it down into its component parts to be examined separately. First, I will define adolescence and present an overview of developmental theories of adolescence, focusing on the processes of individuation and identity formation. I will then present a review of the literature of the psychology of fiction, looking at the cognitive and emotional effects of engaging with fictional narratives. Finally, in an integration of these two topics, I will explore how the effects of fiction may have particular resonance in adolescence.

Defining Adolescence

The idea of adolescence as a discrete phase of life between childhood and adulthood is relatively recent. The psychologist G. Stanley Hall is largely credited with being the first to define the concept in his *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, published in 1904. Baxter (2008) argues that adolescence was “invented” in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century in response to anxieties about a rapidly modernizing world. Advances such as changes in child labor laws, and the beginning of compulsory secondary education created a “new” segment of the population to be defined and studied.

Many definitions of adolescence emphasize the biological factors that influence this phase of life, especially the physiological changes brought on by the onset of puberty. In recent years adolescent brain development has been given increased attention. It was long thought that the majority of brain development occurred in early childhood, and that a child's brain was essentially done developing by around the age of 5 (Jensen & Nutt, 2015). Recent advances in neuroscience have revealed that adolescence is, in fact, a time of rapid brain development. Factors such as impulsivity and risk-taking, as well as the emergence of some types of mental illness during adolescence, have been tentatively linked to the unique developmental state of the adolescent brain (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011).

Clearly the period of life from roughly 10-19 (World Health Organization, 2015) has some unique biological determinants. However, it is also clear that the modern concept of adolescence as a distinct life stage is, in large part, socially constructed. Just as its "invention" was shaped by social and economic factors, so too was its evolution over the past century. For example, the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2014) has proposed that societal changes, most notably a steep rise in the age of marriage and parenthood, have led to a life phase he calls "emerging adulthood" that is distinct from both adolescence and adulthood. In this phase, many of the tasks of identity exploration, traditionally assigned to adolescence, are seen to stretch well into the twenties (Arnett, 2014).

Cultural and technological changes have also shaped modern-day adolescence. Danah Boyd (2014) spent many years engaged in an ethnographic study of the digital lives of teens in the United States. She argues that busy scheduled lives, and parental restriction of freedom due to perceived danger in the outside world, have resulted in today's teenagers having less freedom to socialize with each other in person than at any other time in the past century. This

development has converged with cultural changes brought about by the pervasiveness of the Internet and social media. Boyd argues that teen's engagement with social media, which is often seen by adults as obsessive or addictive, represents a reclaiming of the sociality of adolescence - the desire to connect with peers in a non-structured way - in a social context that denies teens this experience. Thus certain elements of adolescence, including identity exploration and the centrality of peer relationships, appear to stay relatively consistent, even while the social and historical context of adolescence changes.

Developmental Theories of Adolescence

Sigmund Freud.

Freud's (1905) theory of infantile sexuality is based on the idea that the "final outcome" of sexual development is the "normal sexual life of the adult, in which the pursuit of pleasure comes under the sway of the reproductive function." According to Freud, this occurs in what he called the "genital stage" of psychosexual development. The genital stage corresponds with the development of secondary sex characteristics and increased sexual impulses that come with the onset of puberty. Peers, rather than family members, become the object of adolescents' sexual attraction and impulses. Freud theorized that this shift promotes separation from their families of origin, which is a goal of adolescence (Berzoff, 2011a).

Peter Blos.

The psychoanalytic understanding of adolescence, as first introduced by Freud, was expanded upon by Peter Blos (1979), who referred to adolescence as a "second individuation." The second individuation process is characterized by "the shedding of family dependencies, the loosening of infantile object ties in order to become a member of society at large or, simply, of the adult world" (pg. 142). In some ways this process can be seen as a kind of reenactment of

the first individuation phase, which occurs in early childhood (Mahler, 1974). However, unlike early childhood individuation, in which the child achieves a level of physical independence, the second individuation involves a lessening of dependency on internalized familial objects. As the adolescent, who is not yet a fully “autonomous” adult, distances herself from her parents, her peer group becomes a crucial source of support (Muuss, 1980). Blos also stressed that regression and turmoil were developmentally appropriate and necessary to the formation of an individuated, consolidated identity. This often takes the form of rebellion, experimentation, or “the testing of the self by going to excess” (Blos, 1962, p. 12).

Erik Erikson.

Erik Erikson was a contemporary and friend of Blos. And, like Blos, Erikson wrote extensively on adolescence. However, Erikson’s theories have been more prominent and influential in shaping a modern understanding of adolescence, particularly his concept of *identity crisis*. Erikson’s work is notable for the way that it built on Freud’s drive and structural theories by looking at how the social world impacts intrapsychic structures.

Erikson’s (1950) developmental life stage model was based on Freud’s psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic, etc.) and expanded on the theory of infantile sexuality by incorporating an understanding of the child’s physical and social growth. Each stage is defined by a particular crisis that corresponds with the psychosocial task or conflict that is to be mastered at that stage. For example the infant is faced with the conflict of “basic trust vs. basic mistrust” (p. 247). Once this crisis is resolved, the child moves into the next phase, which is defined by the conflict of “autonomy vs. doubt and shame” (p.251), and so on. Whereas Freud’s psychosexual stages end with the genital stage (adolescence), Erikson extended his theory of development past adolescence and into adulthood. His understanding of the individual as continuing to grow and

change throughout the lifespan was an important contribution to the field of human development (Berzoff, 2011b).

The defining conflict of adolescence, according to this model is “identity vs. role confusion.” Erikson (1968) defined identity as, “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity” (p. 19). Any felt sense of sameness and continuity in childhood is massively disrupted in adolescence by the arrival of puberty with its emotional and physiological upheavals. With adulthood on the horizon, Erikson saw the adolescent as being faced with the task of settling into a stable sexual and occupational identity.¹ Like Blos, Erikson saw the necessity of regression during this stage, asserting that many of the conflicts of earlier stages are re-experienced during adolescence in the process of forging a new sense of identity.

Like other theorists, Erikson emphasized the importance of the peer group in adolescence, noting the importance of “falling in love” at this stage. Falling in love, according to Erikson, has importance beyond the function of finding love objects outside of the family and creating reproductive possibilities. It also serves an important role in identity formation. He writes: “To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused ego image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified” (Erikson, 1950, pg. 262). This definition of love is applicable not only to sexual or romantic relationships, but also to the intense friendships that often form during adolescence. However, the peer group also has the capacity to inflict great cruelty. The outsized

¹ A full critique of this model is outside the scope of this study, however it should be pointed out that Erikson, like Freud, believed that the endpoint of “healthy” sexual development was a heterosexual relationship.

anxiety experienced by adolescents often leads them to form rigid and exclusive cliques as a defense against the loss of their tenuous sense of identity.

Erikson is most well known for his concept of the identity crisis. In his 1968 work *Identity: Youth and Crisis* he wrote about how the phrase has been misinterpreted due to a common misunderstanding of the word “crisis.” He clarified that his intended meaning is that of, “a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation” (Erikson, 1968, p. 2). Important to the identity crisis in adolescence is the concept of *moratorium*, defined as a “delay of adult commitments” (p. 157), which is often sanctioned or even institutionalized by various cultures (e.g. going away to college, the “gap year,” or the Amish *rumspringa*). The purpose of a moratorium is to allow for experimentation without requiring premature commitment to an adult identity. The danger here, according to Erikson is in excessive or dangerous experimentation that leads to a premature commitment to a negative identity (e.g. criminality or drug addiction). Therefore, successful adolescent moratorium allows for the optimal amount of experimentation so that the adolescent can eventually commit to an identity that allows for an authentic and continuous sense of self.

The developmental theories described above conceptualize adolescence as a distinct phase of life, which serves as a transition between childhood and adolescence, and which is fundamentally concerned with issues of identity formation and individuation from one’s family. In order to better understand the importance that fictional narratives may have during adolescence, I now turn to a review of the literature investigating the cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement with fiction and relationships with fictional characters.

The Psychology of Fiction

I argue that the particular developmental tasks of adolescence influence the way that adolescents engage with, and are impacted by fictional narratives. Fundamental to this argument is the idea that fictional narratives affect the reader in a meaningful way. Miall & Kuiken (2002) assert that literary reading engages readers in a uniquely emotional way, due to a combination of narrative and aesthetic elements. These elements come together to create “metaphors of personal identification” capable of modifying emotion and self-understanding (p. 232). Several empirical studies support the idea that reading fiction has measurable emotional and cognitive effects on the reader.

Much of the research on the psychology of fiction has focused on the question of whether reading literary fictional narratives increases empathy in the reader. For example, research conducted by Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson (2006), investigated the relationship between frequent fiction reading and performance on measures of empathy and social acumen. The authors identified participants who had been exposed throughout their life to mainly narrative fiction as well those who had been exposed mainly to expository non-fiction. They found a positive correlation between fiction reading and empathic skills, and a negative correlation for non-fiction reading. While Mar and his colleagues looked at the effect of lifelong exposure to fiction, Johnson (2012) looked at effects immediately after reading a work of fiction. Two studies investigated participants’ subjective, behavioral and perceptive responses after reading a short fictional story, and reading induced higher levels of affective empathy and engagement in pro-social behavior. This was especially true among participants who were more transported into the story.

In their research, Kaufman and Libby (2012) explore ways that reading fiction can change one's beliefs or behaviors. Beyond feelings of sympathy or empathy, reading fiction allows the reader to take on, in a deeper way, the *experience* of another. The concept of "experience-taking" is defined as, "the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character's thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one's own" (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 2). Their paper describes a series of laboratory studies designed to explore phenomenon of experience-taking, as well as its antecedents and consequences. They found that readers had higher levels of experience-taking when they had lower levels of self-consciousness, and vice-versa, leading to the conclusion that one is better able to take on the character's subjective experience when one is able to temporarily let go of a consciousness of their own identity. This is similar to Johnson's (2012) result that showed that being more transported into a story led readers to be more affected by it.

Additionally, Kaufman and Libby (2012) measured the effects of experience-taking in terms of changes in beliefs and behaviors. This effect was stronger when the narrative was written in the first person, and when the character shared a significant "in-group membership" with the reader. However, narratives involving characters with stigmatized identities not shared with the reader (e.g. a gay character when the reader is straight) led to a decrease in stereotyping and negative attitudes toward the stigmatized group. Overall, the empirical support of the concept of "experience-taking" is a significant contribution to our understanding of *how* fictional narratives are able to bring about emotional and cognitive changes in the reader.

Adolescent Engagement with Fiction

The cognitive and emotional processes that are involved in reading fiction are related to the developmental tasks of adolescence. The capacity for empathy is critical for adolescents as they forge significant relationships with their peers, outside of their families of origin. Further, the ability to fully take on the experience of a fictional character, and to have one's emotions and beliefs modified by the experience serves the process of identity formation. Additionally, relationships formed with fictional characters can serve some similar functions to relationships formed with peers in adolescence, such as providing a sense of belonging as well as a means of projecting aspects of one's own developing identity onto another and seeing them reflected back at the self. There is very little empirical research that looks specifically at adolescent engagement with fictional narratives. Some of the limited research that does exist is presented below.

Ivey & Johnston, (2013) researched the outcomes of "engaged reading" among a sample of 71 eighth graders from a single public middle school. The researchers drew on an impressive amount of qualitative data including bi-weekly observation of students, video recordings of student discussions of books, and end-of-year surveys of students and teachers. The instructional context of the classroom had recently changed from one in which classic texts were uniformly assigned, to one where students were permitted to choose personally relevant texts and read at their own pace. The study revealed that, for most students, social and emotional outcomes were more salient than academic outcomes. Some of the major themes that emerged from student interviews included: changes in relationships, shifts in students' sense of themselves, expanded social imagination, and increased social and moral agency. It was observed that these changes

were associated with the act of reading, as well as with the discussions that emerged as a result of reading.

In Polleck's (2011) study of a book club for adolescent girls, she uses the image of the "dressing room" to describe how the book club served as a safe space for the girls to "try on" various fictional experiences and scenarios. The books they read were chosen for their focus on family relationships, and served as a jumping off point for exploration of the girls' own diverse family experiences. By putting themselves in the shoes of the books' characters, the girls were able to imagine and experiment with different possibilities – to take and incorporate what was useful to them and discard what was not.

Parasocial Relationships

Horton and Wohl (1956), writing during a time that television was becoming the dominant form of popular entertainment, observed the development a new type of relationship:

The most remote and illustrious of men are met *as if* they were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*. (p. 215)

While acknowledging the potential for relationships with fictional characters, Horton and Wohl focused on certain novel types of television performers such as announcers, interviewers and game show hosts, whom they called *personae* (p. 216). They outlined some of the qualities of parasocial relationships, which are by nature one-sided and non-reciprocal, and yet offer reliable consistency without demand or obligation. The concept of the parasocial relationship has influenced decades of research on how people relate to both media figures and fictional characters, particularly through mass media such as television and film. A novel concept when it

was first introduced, parasocial relationships are, “now understood to be an integral and important part of many people’s systems of social relationships” (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 503). Several recent studies have looked at parasocial relationships in ways that are relevant to the topic of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives.

In considering the role of parasocial relationships to adolescents in particular, one of the most interesting parts of Horton and Wohl’s (1956) definition is their assertion that the parasocial relationship is experienced as, “analogous to those in a primary group” of peers (p. 215). Given the increased interest in both the peer group (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968), and popular culture (Rosenblum, Daniolos, Kass, & Martin, 1999) in adolescence, it seems likely that parasocial relationships would take on particular importance during this time. One way this can be seen is in adolescents’ idolization of celebrities, including reality television stars, professional athletes, actors, and musicians. Giles & Maltby (2004) investigated the relationship between adolescents’ interest in celebrities and measures of autonomy and attachment. Interest in celebrities was found to correlate with high emotional autonomy, high attachment with peers, and low attachment to parents. The authors concluded that celebrities often serve as a group of “pseudo-friends” (p. 820) who are discussed within the peer group. This suggests parasocial relationships with celebrities serve a supportive function for adolescents as they navigate a time of increasing autonomy from their families.

A study by Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, (2009) explored parasocial relationships in a slightly different context, looking at the way that entering a fictional world in the form of a favored television show can provide the experience of belonging. The researchers demonstrated that participants (all American undergraduate college students) sought out their favorite television shows when they felt lonely and felt less lonely when watching. They also found that

thinking about their favorite shows buffered participants against drops in self-esteem and feelings of rejection. The authors presented their findings as evidence in support of a “Social Surrogacy Hypothesis” (p. 352), which holds that favored television shows can serve a parasocial function by creating a feeling of belonging.

Eyal & Cohen (2006), investigated another aspect of viewers’ relationship to television characters: “the parasocial breakup,” which occurs when, “a character with whom a viewer has developed a PSR goes off the air” (p. 504). Specifically, they studied the reactions of college students to the ending of the long-running sitcom *Friends*. The show was on the air for ten years, and centered on the interpersonal relationships of a group of friends, which allowed viewers to feel as if they were a part of the group, increasing the potential for the formation of parasocial relationships. The researchers found that the intensity of the viewer’s parasocial relationship with their favorite *Friends* character was the strongest predictor of distress when the show ended. Other factors that influenced participants’ reactions included: “commitment to the show, affinity to the show, the perceived popularity of the favorite character, and participants’ loneliness” (pg. 516). The findings suggest that the ending of parasocial relationships follows similar patterns and has similar effects to the ending of real-life social relationships, but are considerably less stressful and intense. This study adds support to the notion that parasocial relationships function in many of the same ways that real social relationships do, and invoke real emotional responses from viewers.

Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, & Arkin (2014), also employed the concept of parasocial relationships in their exploration of the potential for fictional characters to offer opportunities for self-expansion. The concept of self-expansion is based on the idea that one of the reasons people pursue new relationships is to “accrue physical and social resources that

enhance pursuit of their goals” (Shedlosky-Shoemaker, et. al., 2014, p. 557). In other words, people use social relationships as opportunities for self-expansion, and people are often attracted to others based on their ability to provide them with a new or different experience. One of the ways that individuals achieve self-expansion in relationships is through cognitive overlap, or when the “experiences, perspective, ideas... encompassed in the mental representations of close others become confluent with the mental representation of the self” (p. 558).

The researchers (Shedlosky-Shoemaker, et. al., 2014) designed two studies to investigate the relationships between cognitive overlap, self-expansion, and exposure to fictional characters through transportation into a narrative. In the first study, participants read a short, fictional, first-person narrative about running a race, and then responded to a number of surveys which measured their level of psychological transportation into the narrative, cognitive overlap with the character, and perceived self-expansion. They found that being more transported into the story led to higher levels of cognitive overlap and self-expansion. The second study was similar, but participants were also measured their identification with the character in terms of their actual self and their ideal self. They found that a perceived similarity of a character to one’s actual self led to higher levels of cognitive overlap, while similarity to one’s ideal self predicted experiences of self-expansion. This study is relevant to the question of whether fictional narratives can serve a social function for adolescents, especially in identity exploration. As the authors point out:

Parasocial relationships can provide a safe haven for self-expansion: One can vicariously take part in new experiences without risks, such as social rejection or physical harm. Moreover, these interactions provide an opportunity to be exposed to people, albeit fictional, who may possess characteristics and experiences that social others in one’s actual physical world might not possess. (p. 573)

Taken together, the research described above suggests that parasocial relationships, such as those formed with fictional characters, can serve some of the same functions as social relationships with peers. While parasocial relationships do not replicate the strength and power of real social relationships, they do have a measurable impact on experiences of attachment, belonging, and self-expansion.

Conclusion

A review of psychoanalytic, developmental theories of adolescence (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1904) reflected two major themes. First, adolescents are tasked with the formation of a relatively stable adult identity and are often engaged in exploration in service of that task. Second, as adolescents lessen their dependence on their immediate families, they increasingly turn to their peer group for support and companionship. This process of individuation also serves a function in the development of adult identities. Both of these developmental tasks – identity formation and individuation – take place within the context of the social world, of which fictional worlds can be seen as an extension. Adolescents may use fictional narratives as both environments and tools for individuation and identity exploration. Research from social psychology and media studies on the psychology of narrative fiction and parasocial relationships helps to elucidate the processes by which adolescents may use fictional narratives in pursuit of individuation and identity formation.

Empirical studies looking at the impact of fictional narratives on readers revealed that fiction has the potential to shape our sense of self over time through processes such as identification and empathy and emotion. Kaufman & Libby's (2012) concept of experience-taking is especially helpful in conceptualizing adolescent's use of fiction in identity formation. This idea is supported by Polleck's (2011) observation that adolescent girls in a book club used

fictional narratives as a kind of “dressing room” (p. 139) where they could try on various fictional experiences, as well as Ivey & Johnston's (2013) findings that engaged adolescent readers reported changes in their, “identities, in their sense of agency, and in their relational, moral, and intellectual lives” (p. 255).

Finally, the concept of parasocial relationships (Derrick et al., 2009; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014) provided an empirically supported, theoretical conceptualization of fiction as an extension of the social world with characters as an extension of the peer group, which is supportive of the notion that fictional narratives may play a particularly salient role during adolescence as compared to other stages of life.

Erikson described adolescence as a time of transition - between childhood with its individualistic concerns, and the social world of adulthood. Engagement with fictional narratives during this time can be especially impactful because it allows for an experience that is somewhere in between the internal and external worlds – allowing adolescents to explore various scenarios and identities without real-world consequences. A useful way of understanding this phenomenon is through Winnicott’s concept of *transitional experience*, which will be described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Winnicott: Transitional Experience

Donald Woods Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician, wrote that, “cultural experience is located in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment” (Winnicott, 1967, p.371). It exists within an, “intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common’” (Winnicott 1953, p. 91). “Transitional experience” refers to all of the activities and experiences that can be thought to occupy this potential space (Mitchell & Black, 1995). In this chapter I will explore Winnicott’s concept of transitional experience as a means of conceptualizing adolescents’ engagement with fictional narratives. I will first present an overview of Winnicott’s body of work, including the personal and historical factors that contextualize his theories. Next, I will explore how the idea of transitional experience is valuable in understanding both the adolescent experience overall, and the experience of engaging with fictional narratives, especially through reading.

Winnicott in Context

Winnicott (1896 – 1971) worked with children and families throughout his career – first as a pediatrician, and later as an analyst. Along with his second wife, Clare, he devoted much of his career to helping the less fortunate. He worked for decades with poor children in a hospital clinic. During World War II he worked with children who had been separated from their parents

during the evacuation of London (Applegate & Bonovitz, 1995). These experiences informed his theories about how maternal care and environmental failure effect development.

Winnicott became a part of the British psychoanalytic community at a time marked by a schism between two rival camps. Those aligned with Anna Freud considered their work to adhere closer to Sigmund Freud's original theories. In contrast, the "Kleinians" embraced certain theoretical revisions introduced by Melanie Klein – most notably, the notion that an infant's drives are relational, and directed towards objects, rather than being only aimed at gratification, as Freud believed (Flanagan, 2011a). Originally identified as a Kleinian, Winnicott eventually developed his own theories, which fell outside the bounds of Klein's strict orthodoxy. Subsequently, he became a major figure in the British "independent" or "middle group" who developed what was later known as object relations theory (Mitchell & Black, 1995). In addition to object relations, Winnicott's theories anticipated later developments in psychoanalytic theory such as self-psychology (Flanagan, 2011b) and relational theory (Applegate & Bonovitz, 1995).

Overview of Winnicott's Major Concepts

This chapter focuses on Winnicott's concept of transitional experience and how it can be used as a framework for understanding adolescent engagement with fictional narratives.

Winnicott's conceptualization of cultural experience as a transitional phenomenon emerged in his later writing, and built upon his earlier work. In order to place transitional experience in context, I will first present a brief overview some of the major concepts in Winnicott's developmental theory. Taken together, these concepts attempt to explain the myriad ways that humans strive to reconcile our paradoxical needs for attachment and separateness.

Primary maternal preoccupation and “good-enough” mothering.

In contrast to the stage-oriented theories of Freud and Klein, Winnicott’s developmental theory – based on his extensive observation of mothers and babies – focused on what he called capacities. He purposefully avoided attaching these capacities to specific ages or putting them in a particular sequence (Applegate & Bonovitz, 1995, pg. 28). In a statement that concisely summarizes much of his theory of infant development, Winnicott once famously proclaimed that there is, “no such thing as a baby” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 587). By this he meant that a human infant only exists within the context of the relationship with a caretaker (he would say the mother) who keeps the baby alive through physical sustenance and love. The physical holding and nurturing of the infant by the parent forms the basis of what Winnicott called the *holding environment*, a “physical and psychical space within which the infant is protected without knowing he is protected” (Mitchell & Black, 1995 p.126).

The state of union and merger that is experienced within the infant/mother dyad in the earliest phase of life is brought about by a state that Winnicott referred to as *primary maternal preoccupation*. This, he said, could be thought of as a kind of “temporary madness” brought about by biological changes starting in the third trimester of pregnancy and extending through the baby’s first few weeks of life. In this state, the mother is able to ignore her own needs, interests, and subjectivity, in order to attend fully and completely to the baby’s needs (Mitchell & Black, 1995). The mother’s nearly unfailing attunement allows the baby to experience what Winnicott called *subjective omnipotence*. He theorized that in a state of pure subjectivity, the baby believes that desire (i.e. hunger) causes the object (i.e. mother’s breast) to appear. The mother can only subsume her own subjectivity for so long, and eventually she begins to make small lapses in her attunement and immediate attention. These “failures” are necessary to the

infant's development, representing the first steps away from subjective omnipotence and toward an awareness of an external, objective reality.

While the mother's continued empathic attunement is necessary to the child's healthy development, Winnicott was quick to point out that the mother does not need to be perfect; she only needs to be "good enough" (Flanagan, 2011a, pg. 127). That is, she needs to be relatively attuned to the baby's needs, such that the baby is able to experience a nearly continual sense of being safe and provided for. In the case of "not-good-enough" parenting, the holding environment is intruded upon by excessive physical discomfort or emotional distress. Winnicott called such intrusions *impingement*, and noted that it represents a premature exposure to the demands of the external reality and the needs of others, which interfere with the healthy development of the baby's own subjectivity (Mitchell & Black, 1995, pg. 129). The presence of a sufficient holding environment and good enough parenting facilitates the development of various capacities that Winnicott identified as essential for healthy development.

The transitional object.

The Winnicottian concept that has gained the most mainstream recognition is that of the *transitional object*. Winnicott observed that many infants and young develop an intense attachment to an object such as a blanket or a teddy bear:

This object goes on being important. The parents get to know its value and carry it round when travelling. The mother lets it get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduced a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant (Winnicott, 1953, p. 91).

The transitional object is used symbolically by the child; it provides comfort because it serves as a symbolic representation of the parent during the time that the child is transitioning from total

dependence and merger with the parent to an understanding of herself as a separate being (Flanagan, 2011a, p. 128). Mitchell & Black (1995) point out that while the transitional object is generally understood as a bridge between dependence and independence, Winnicott actually understood the object as symbolizing:

...the transition between two different modes of organizing experience, two different patterns of positioning the self in relation to others. What makes the teddy bear so important is not just that it stands in for the mother, but that it constitutes a special extension of the child's self, halfway between the mother that the child creates in subjective omnipotence and the mother that the child finds operating on her own behalf in the subjective world (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 128).

Transitional experience.

Winnicott described the concept of the transitional object, as summarized above, in his 1953 essay entitled, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession." In this same essay he extends the concept beyond the physical object, to the broader realm of *transitional phenomena*. In helping the child to navigate the transition between absolute dependence and relative independence, the transitional object also serves as a symbol for what Winnicott called "the third part of the life of a human being." That is, "an intermediate area of *experiencing* to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott, 1953, pg. 90). The navigation of the space between the internal/subjective and the external/objective continues throughout life and manifests in different ways depending on the individual's stage of development.

Play.

The dialectic in infancy between subjective omnipotence and objective reality (Mitchell & Black, 1995, pg. 127) is echoed throughout an individual's life, and played out within the realm of transitional experience Winnicott conceptualized the imaginative and creative play of children as existing in this realm, and devoted a great deal of his scholarship to developing a theoretical understanding of play, and the relationship between play and psychotherapy. In his 1971 book, *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott writes: "Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together" (pg. 38).

Cultural experience.

In Winnicott's earlier work he hinted at interest in the relationship between cultural experience and transitional phenomena when he said that the special meaning given to the transitional object is later, "spread out over the whole cultural field." Later he turned his attention more explicitly to the question of where culture is "located" within human experience. He poses this question in his essay, *The Place Where We Live*, writing:

If we look at our lives we shall probably find that we spend most of our time neither in behaviour nor in contemplation, but somewhere else. I ask: where?... What, for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony, or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed, or playing tennis (Winnicott, 1971, pg. 105)

According to Winnicott cultural experience, like transitional phenomena, takes place within the metaphorical potential space, which first exists between mother and baby. He recognized continuity between childhood play and subsequent, more evolved forms of cultural expression.

Reading Fiction as Transitional Experience

Winnicott did not write specifically about the experience of reading fiction, although it certainly falls within the above description of transitional experience. If we imagine someone reading we may picture a person sitting in a chair with a book. The *experience* of reading fiction, however, can be thought of as existing with a potential space. The reader filters the story through her own subjective experience, while simultaneously submitting to the objective reality of another – both of the author, and of the characters the author has created. The reader is never fully in the realm of dream-like inner life, or of completely objective external reality, but rather is constantly moving between these two states.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, the question of what exactly is going on within the mind of the reader is one that has recently been investigated by social psychologists who have found that emotion, empathy, social acumen and “theory of mind” are all impacted by the experience of reading fiction, or otherwise engaging with fictional narratives (Djikic et al., 2009; Goldstein & Winner, 2012; Goldstein, 2009; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011; Mar et al., 2006; Oatley, 1994, 1999). In particular, Kaufman and Libby’s (2012) concept of “experience-taking” (p. 2) is relevant for adolescents for whom the experience of “trying on” the beliefs, memories, or personality traits of a character, may function to support identity formation.

Transitional Phenomena in Adolescence

Winnicott observed that children often make use of a transitional object, such as a blanket, stuffed animal or doll, as a means of managing anxiety. He writes, “...the original soft object continues to be absolutely necessary at bed-time or at a time of loneliness or when a depressed mood threatens” (Winnicott, 1953, pg. 91). This type of anxiety reflects the child’s ambivalence about the transition from a place of absolute dependence to relative independence,

from merger to separation. This transition occurs within the context of what Margaret Mahler called separation-individuation. According to Mahler, the separation-individuation process marks the “psychological birth” of the infant, as she comes to understand that she is a differentiated individual – both physically and psychically separate from her mother (Mahler, 1974).

In Winnicott’s developmental theory, the process of separation and individuation in infancy is a transition not merely from union to relative independence, but also from a state of pure subjectivity to an acceptance of the objective reality of the other. This idea is echoed in Erickson’s (1950) theory of identity formation in adolescence, in that he saw adolescence as a transitory phase between childhood and adulthood, where the individual must learn to balance the needs of the self within the context of a complex social world. Peter Blos (1979) referred to adolescence as a “second individuation,” characterized by “the shedding of family dependencies, the loosening of infantile object ties in order to become a member of society at large or, simply, of the adult world” (pg. 142).

Within this framework, adolescents’ devotion to a favored fictional narrative can be understood as an important and developmentally appropriate use of transitional experience. It is not uncommon for an adolescent to depend on an old teddy bear or blanket for comfort in regressed moments of loneliness or anxiety. However, engaging in cultural experience, including through fictional narrative, represents a higher-level use of transitional experience which serves to support the adolescent in the complicated tasks of this stage of life: navigating her social world, forging her unique identity, and in some cases preparing to separate from her family of origin in order to find her place in the world.

Summary

Donald Winnicott's theories on infant development and maternal care formed the basis for his later work concerning transitional phenomena and location of cultural experience. The convergence of development and culture makes Winnicott's work a useful framework for understanding the ways that adolescents engage with, and make use of fictional narratives. In the next chapter I will investigate how Heinz Kohut's theory of Self Psychology can add depth to an understanding of this phenomenon. In particular, I will use Kohut's concept of selfobjects to understand adolescent's use of fictional characters to support identity formation.

CHAPTER V

Self Psychology

In this chapter I will explore Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology. Some social and historical context for the theory is provided, followed by an overview of the major concepts of self psychology, including the role of empathy, *selfobjects*, the *tri-polar self*, and *transmuting internalization*. I will then briefly explore the applicability of Kohut's theories to the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives.

Kohut in Context

Heinz Kohut (1923 – 1981) was born in pre-war Vienna, to a middle class, Jewish family. In 1939, he fled the Nazis and ended up in Chicago where he became affiliated with the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis (Flanagan, 2011b). Kohut was strongly tied to traditional psychoanalysis for most of his career, but towards the end of his life he began to introduce controversial theories that challenged the psychoanalytic status quo.

Kohut's contributions to theory and technique came from his evolving understanding of narcissism. He found that the prevailing Freudian view of narcissism at the time, and the traditional wisdom about how to work with such patients, was not creating lasting therapeutic change in the narcissistic patients he worked with. Self psychology emerged as a radical re-conceptualization of narcissism and of the treatment relationship (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Another way that Kohut broke with traditional psychoanalysis was in his de-emphasis of interpretation in treatment. Kohut felt that the creation of corrective emotional experiences

through empathic response was much more important than interpretation in creating therapeutic change (Baker & Baker, 1987).

Self psychology, like all psychological theories, is shaped by the social and historical context in which it was developed. As such, Kohut's theories represented a very different view of human nature than that of Freud. Social context influences the symptoms and presenting problems of those seen in clinical populations, which in turn influences the theories developed to explain these problems. Freud's emphasis on guilt, and the repression of aggressive and sexual drives, makes sense in the context of the conservative Viennese society at the turn of the century. Kohut's emphasis on feelings of emptiness, isolation, and alienation were "consistent with the major themes in late-twentieth-century literature and social analysis" (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 149.)

Major Concepts in Self Psychology

Empathy.

The concept of empathy is at the core of Kohut's theory. In his treatment model, Kohut's emphasis on empathy signaled a significant departure from traditional psychoanalytic technique, which emphasizes insight as the curative factor. He uses the word in a particular way. True empathy, in Kohut's view, is not merely the putting oneself "in the place" of another, but rather, involves an understanding of the other from *inside* of their subjective experience (Baker & Baker, 1987). For example, imagine a toddler drops her favorite toy in a puddle and then begins to cry. The parent, putting himself in the same position would react in a very different way and might say something like, "Don't cry. It's not a big deal." A more empathic response, which would take into account the child's subjective experience, might be, "Oops, Teddy fell in the puddle and got all dirty! That's sad. You know what? We can take Teddy home and give him a

bath in the washing machine and he will be clean again.” The empathic response validates the child’s experience and allows her a calm and reassuring response which is beyond her own developmental capacity, but that will be internalized and can be accessed later as she learns affect regulation and self-soothing.

Kohut recognized that no parent (or therapist) is perfect and therefore a certain empathic failure is inevitable. Therefore it is not perfect empathy, but rather, the optimal balance of empathic frustration and gratification that is essential to the healthy development of the self.

Baker & Baker (1987) use a helpful physical metaphor to describe this process:

As with mirroring, a good enough parental environment is necessary for the idealizing developmental line to mature successfully. Minor failures create the need for internal structures, while basic success creates a secure enough environment to permit growth. Internal structures develop like muscles – some resistance adds power and bulk. No challenge yields atrophy and excess exhausts, or can even tear, the muscle (p. 4).

Within a matrix of reasonable parental empathy, occasional empathic failures help the child to develop the internal capacities necessary to reduce the intensity of their selfobject needs.

Selfobjects.

Object relations theorists used the word “object” to refer to people, in order to convey the subject/object relationship that exists between the self and other. Kohut deliberately used the word “selfobjects” to convey a slightly different meaning:

Selfobjects are objects which we experience as part of our self; the expected control over them is, therefore, closer to the concept of the control which a grown-up expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of the control which he expects to have over others. (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 414).

It is the internalization of certain aspects of an object, which make it a “selfobject.” In the self psychology literature it is most often people, usually caregivers, who are considered selfobjects. However, anything that is internalized and meets an essential need in the service of the self can be a selfobject. For example religious symbols, art, or literature could all serve as selfobjects (Flanagan, 2011b).

Selfobject needs of the tripolar self.

Kohut’s theory of the tripolar self is a metapsychological model that, like Freud’s structural model of the id, ego and superego, relies on a physical metaphor to explain intrapsychic processes. Kohut described three “poles” of the self. Each pole has corresponding needs for a particular type of selfobject: mirroring, idealization, and twinship. When these needs are reasonably well met in childhood, a “healthy narcissism” is maintained in adulthood. On the other hand, repeated early failures in meeting selfobject needs show up in the adult in the form of pathological narcissism. In treatment, it is the “selfobject transference” to the therapist that indicates the type of selfobject failure may have contributed to the patient’s symptoms. Kohut connected significant empathic failures of the selfobjects in each pole to particular types of pathological narcissism in adulthood (ie mirror hungry, ideal hungry, or alter-ego hungry personalities). However, for the purposes of this study, this chapter focuses mainly on Kohut’s view of healthy development of the cohesive self through the use of selfobjects.

Mirroring.

The first pole in Kohut’s model is the pole of ambition, which is the source of “basic strivings for power and success.” This pole requires mirroring selfobjects that, “respond to and confirm the child’s innate sense of vigour, greatness and perfection” (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 414). In early childhood, the mirroring selfobject reflects back to the child her healthy sense of

grandiosity. With sufficient mirroring and optimal frustration, the child eventually develops a more balanced and realistic sense of her self. But the healthy grandiosity experienced and mirrored in childhood, lives on in the adult in the form of enduring feelings of confidence and self worth. Empathic mirroring does not consist of constantly telling the child that they are perfect and wonderful. Rather mirroring must be specific in its reflection of what is unique and special about the particular child. When instead the selfobject mirrors qualities that do not feel authentic to the child, a distorted sense of self can develop which is often experienced in adulthood as feelings of emptiness or a lack of a sense of agency over one's life (Flanagan, 2011b). This part of Kohut's theory is very similar to Winnicott's concept of the True Self, described in the previous chapter. Both theories hold that the ability to feel vital, real, and creative, depend on the empathically attuned responses from our caregivers in childhood.

Idealizing.

The second pole “harbours the basic idealized goals,” and requires selfobjects, “to whom the child can look up and with whom he can merge as an image of calmness, infallibility and omnipotence” (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 414) Kohut referred to this type of selfobject as the “idealized parent imago.” The very young child does not have the internal capacity to soothe himself if he becomes over stimulated, or feel strong and powerful in the face of the big scary outside world. The child locates those qualities in the idealized parent and through the “archaic merger” is able to be calmed and feel safe. As the child's internal capacities develop he is able to meet this need through closeness to selfobjects without needing to be merged with them (Baker & Baker, 1987). However, the experience of having been able to merge with an idealized selfobject in childhood is retained in adulthood as, “the nucleus of the strength of our leading

ideals and of the calmness we experience as we live our lives under the guidance of our inner goals” (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 417).

Twinship.

Kohut’s original theory was of a “bi-polar self” with the pole of ambition and the pole of ideals, which are connected to each other by a “tension arc” resulting in a particular constellation of talents and skills. Later he identified a third selfobject need – that of twinship or “alter-ego,” which was eventually fully incorporated into his model, changing the “bi-polar self” into a “tripolar self.” This pole requires a type of selfobject that, “by conforming to the self’s appearance, opinions, and values confirms the existence, the reality of the self” (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 421). In other words, the twinship pole reflects the individual’s need to feel that there are others like them, and through the mutual recognition of similarity, to affirm their sense of belonging in the world.

Transmuting internalization.

Kohut differentiated selfobjects from other types of objects by emphasizing how they are not simply “used” or related to, but are internalized and incorporated into the self. He used the phrase *transmuting internalization* to describe the process by which individuals create internal psychological structures by taking in certain needed attributes of the selfobject. The process of transmuting internalization also involves necessary “minor, non-traumatic failures” (p. 416) by the selfobjects. Through this process children begin to depend less on the selfobjects as they gain the ability to rely on their own internal capacities (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

Selfobjects in Adolescence

Unlike other major psychoanalytic theories (i.e. Freud's theory of infantile sexuality and Erikson's eight stages of man), self psychology is not a developmental theory in that it does not hold that certain processes and tasks are specific to particular life stages. However, Kohut did theorize that selfobjects are needed and used in different ways over the course of development. In infancy and early childhood the child has not yet developed any internal structures for self-soothing or regulating affect, and so her selfobject needs are intense and focused on her immediate caregivers. In healthy development the intensity of need decreases with maturity, and the child, and later the adult is able to use selfobjects in a less "merger-hungry" way. The circle of potential selfobjects also expands beyond the caregivers, to include other close adults. Beginning in adolescence, peers begin to serve as selfobjects as well (Baker & Baker, 1987). Flanagan (2011b) postulates that the need for twinship selfobjects is particularly strong during adolescence. This idea is consistent with Freud, Blos, and Erikson's developmental models of adolescence described in Chapter III which all emphasize the primacy of the peer group.

Beyond the peer group, adolescents can also find selfobjects in fictional narratives. As described previously, selfobjects do not strictly need to be people, but rather can be any object that is internalized and incorporated into the self. To the extent that a character in a novel, movie or television show meets an adolescent's need for mirroring, idealizing, or twinship, it can be considered a selfobject. Adolescents are most likely to turn to fictional characters in a similar way that they turn to their peers - to meet their twinship needs. Fiction has the advantage of being able to provide a diversity of characters far beyond what might be available in an adolescent's family, peer group or immediate community.

In the following chapter I will revisit the phenomenon of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives. I will bring together concepts from self psychology as well as Winnicott's theory of transitional experience in order to create a theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon. Using this framework I will offer a model for the therapeutic use of fictional narratives with adolescents, as well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion

Introduction

As was discussed in Chapter 3, adolescence has been defined in biological, developmental, and social terms over the past century. Freud conceptualized adolescence as the final stage of psychosexual development. He theorized that the onset of puberty and increased sexual impulses correspond with a shift of interest away from the family and toward peers as the object of these impulses. Erikson (1950, 1968) expanded upon Freud's understanding of adolescence by focusing on the unique ways that adolescents interact with the social world, especially in the task of identity formation. His concept of the normative identity crisis had an enduring influence on the modern understanding of adolescence. Peter Blos (1979) also contributed to the psychoanalytic conceptualization of adolescence through his theory of a "second individuation," (p. 142) in which the adolescent lessens dependencies on her family and shifts her attention to the outside world, especially the social world of peers.

For the purpose of this analysis, I focus on these twin processes – identity formation and individuation – as major developmental tasks of adolescence which are relevant to the ways that adolescents engage with fictional narratives. However, this view of adolescence is not universal, but rather bound by culture and history. For example, the idea that adolescence is a time of individuation from one's family of origin is relevant in a Western individualistic culture, but less so in a collectivist culture. Similarly the idea of "identity," in the way that Erikson uses the word

is reflective of the assumption that each person is in possession of a separate “self,” which is not shared across all cultures and religions. Further, Erikson’s theory of adolescent identity formation is at odds with more postmodern theories of identity. Erikson believed that identity is forged during adolescence and stays relatively stable throughout the rest of adulthood. A constructivist or narrative conceptualization of identity however holds that identity is not fixed, but rather represents an ever-evolving story of self, that can and does change throughout an individual’s life (McLeod, 2006). Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis I employ a model of adolescent development that emphasizes identity formation and individuation, while also acknowledging the theoretical limitations inherent in this model. An understanding of the importance of identity formation and individuation in adolescence are helpful in framing the ways that adolescents engage with fictional narratives, and the particular importance that fiction can have during this stage of life.

The previous two chapters have described Winnicott’s theoretical construct of transitional experience, and Kohut’s self psychology, respectively. In this chapter, I will reiterate and expand upon the applicability of these two theories in order to develop an integrative theoretical framework for understanding adolescent engagement with fictional narratives, and consider how this framework can be applied to clinical work with adolescents. Finally, I will suggest ways that this theoretical understanding of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives can inform future research.

Transitional Experience and Identity Exploration

Erikson (1968) used the word “moratorium” (p. 157) to describe the in-between nature of adolescence – a time when individuals are allowed to explore and experiment before committing to an enduring identity. During this period, adolescents often seek out spaces for exploration. I

argue that fiction can provide such a space. Deep engagement with fictional narratives can support the processes of identity formation and individuation by allowing the adolescent reader to identify with, empathize with, and take on the experience of various fictional characters. Winnicott's concept of transitional experience is helpful in framing the ways that fictional narratives can serve identity exploration.

Winnicott described a spectrum of transitional experience. The use of transitional objects in infancy evolves into childhood play, and later the capacity for cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971). Therefore, the act of reading a novel or watching a film can be understood as a form of play that is more mature than the symbolic play of childhood. The play of a child building with blocks, or an adolescent reading a novel both exist within a suspended place – neither fully inside themselves nor fully engaged in the outside world. Winnicott (1971) describes the act of play as a kind of dream state:

Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality. In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling. (p. 69)

This description of play provides a framework for understanding just how it is that identity exploration occurs while immersed in a fictional narrative. The adolescent is able to pull from her inner world, the world of the story, and the external world, and to reconfigure these pieces in a meaningful way.

Winnicott was interested in the role of creativity and culture in human experience. He wanted to know what exactly is it that we are “doing when we are...reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed” (Winnicott, 1971, pg. 105). In an attempt to answer this question he introduced the concept of “potential space” (Winnicott, 1967, p. 371), which uses a metaphor of location to describe the nature of cultural experience. Cultural experience is “located” in this metaphorical space that exists first between the mother and baby, and later between the inner world and external reality. The literature reviewed in Chapter 3 in the field of the psychology of fiction also addresses the nature of cultural experience. By operationalizing aspects of this experience, researchers attempted to explain just what is happening when we are engaged in the act of reading.

Several researchers measured “transportation,” a concept which also uses a spatial metaphor to describe the reader’s degree of “absorption into a story” (Green & Brock, 2000, pg. 701). Green & Brock (2000) developed a scale to measure readers’ level of transportation, which was designed to reflect “emotional involvement in the story, cognitive attention to the story, feelings of suspense, lack of awareness of surroundings, and mental imagery” (p. 703). Johnson (2012) used this scale in his study investigating the relationship between reading narrative fiction and the development of affective empathy. He found that the more transported readers were into the story, the more likely they were to demonstrate empathy for the characters. Further, he found that this empathy extended into real life, as participants who were more transported and displayed higher levels of empathy were also more likely to engage in pro-social helping behaviors.

Kaufman & Libby's (2012) investigation of “experience-taking” (p. 2) looked at related factors. They found that the ability of readers to take on the experience of the character was

related to their ability to “forget” or “let go of” their own identity and self-concept (p.3). This is similar to “emotional involvement in the story” and “lack of awareness of surroundings” in Green & Brock’s (2000) measure of transportation (p.703). The concept of experience-taking is particularly useful in understanding the ways that engaging with fictional narratives can support the process of identity formation. Erikson (1950) wrote that one of the ways identity is defined in adolescence is “by projecting one’s diffused ego image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified” (pg. 262). Through reading fiction, readers are able go beyond identification and projection by taking on the experience of the character, “...simulating the subjective experience of a character and thereby internalizing that character’s traits into their self-concept” (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 14). Fictional narratives support identity formation by allowing adolescents to explore alternate identities, taking on the subjective emotional experience of various characters in endlessly diverse circumstances.

Reading is a unique form of play that allows the reader to experience things that are not part of her immediate external world. Winnicott’s contribution is the idea that these processes are happening, not strictly inside the mind of the reader, but rather in the metaphorical potential space of transitional experience. Even as the reader is transported into a story and able to take on the subjective experience of a character, she is simultaneously drawing on her inner, personal reality. This scenario is analogous to the overall situation of the adolescent who is similarly in transition. The adolescent has left childhood where her concerns laid mainly with herself and her immediate family. Her interests have shifted to her peer group and the outside world, but she is not yet fully ensconced in the social world of adults. The moratorium of adolescence affords her the ability to “play” through exploration in service of identity formation and individuation.

Fictional Selfobjects and Parasocial Relationships

In chapter 5, I introduced Kohut's idea of selfobjects – objects (usually people), which are experienced as part of the self, and are used to meet an individual's need for mirroring, idealizing and twinship (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Adolescence marks a period when individuals begin to look for selfobjects outside of their immediate families. The peer group becomes increasingly important, especially as a source of potential twinship selfobjects. This understanding of how selfobject needs change during adolescence is consistent with Blos' (1979) idea of adolescence as the “second individuation” (p. 142). In order to achieve a separate and truly individuated sense of self, adolescents need to become less dependent on their parents and they begin to turn to their peers to meet some of emotional needs previously met by their parents.

The application of Kohut's theory of self psychology to adolescents' experiences with fictional narratives depends on the idea that selfobjects do not have to be real people. A fictional character can serve as a selfobject when the reader experiences them as a source of mirroring, idealizing or twinship, and when attributes of these characters are internalized by the reader in the service of creating a more cohesive sense of self. Research on parasocial relationships, which was reviewed in Chapter 3 (Derrick et al., 2009; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014), has demonstrated that one-sided relationships, including with fictional characters, have some of the same qualities of real-life social relationships. Horton & Wohl (1956), who first introduced the idea of parasocial relationships, described how the television viewer experiences a media figure or fictional character, “*as if* they were in the circle of one's peers” (p. 215). Recent research on parasocial relationships demonstrates how fictional characters can serve as an extension of the peer group by providing a sense of belonging (Derrick et al., 2009), opportunities for expansion of the self

(Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014), and easing the transition to adult autonomy (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

While parasocial relationships are limited in their lack of reciprocity and depth, they also may provide the reader or viewer with selfobject relationships that are not available in her social or family environment. For example, I worked with an adult client who felt extremely isolated as a lesbian growing up in a conservative religious community. She recalled that the first time she saw a gay character on a television movie when she was a teenager she instantly felt less alone in the world and began to believe in the possibility for a fulfilling adult life away from her home community. She then sought out more stories with gay characters who were able to provide her with the twinship that was lacking in her immediate environment. Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014), point out that relationships with fictional characters are free of some of the obstacles that exist in the real world. The authors give the example of Tony Soprano from the television show *The Sopranos* as an interesting character that viewers can benefit from having a relationship with, while “protected from social rejection and the physical danger of threatening circumstances” (p. 559). From this perspective fictional characters are truly an extension of the peer group. Parasocial relationships with fictional characters are not simply “lesser” versions of real-life relationships, but rather different types of relationships with potential to support adolescent individuation and identity formation in a unique way.

The need for twinship is the selfobject need that can be met most readily by a fictional character. When a reader or viewer encounters a character that is similar to her in some meaningful way, her sense of self is strengthened through a feeling of recognition and connection to others (as in the previous example of my adult client). While twinship may be the most common type of selfobject associated with fictional characters, I think it is possible to find

other kinds of selfobjects in fiction. For example, a reader with a chaotic, unstable family life may find a fictional parent who exhibits strength, calm and stability. Through the parasocial selfobject relationship the reader can merge with and internalize these characteristics. Similarly, a character who is close in age or slightly older than an adolescent reader may serve as an idealizing selfobject by exhibiting a level of self-control or self-efficacy that the reader has not yet achieved.

Mirroring is the selfobject need that is most difficult to meet via relationship with a fictional character. By definition, selfobject mirroring involves reflecting back a person's unique and special qualities. The specificity of empathy that is required from a mirroring selfobject is more likely to come from a real-life, two-way relationship with a person who knows and appreciates one's specific qualities. However, in taking on the experience of a character who is being empathically mirrored and validated by other characters, the reader may be able to internalize this mirroring, especially if the character is appreciated for qualities that the reader herself identifies with.

The concept of parasocial selfobject relationships in fiction is related to the question of who is, or is not seeing their experience reflected in popular narratives. As majority of characters in popular literature, film, and television are white, heterosexual and able-bodied (among other privileged identities), adolescents from marginalized groups will not have the same access to mirroring, idealizing and twinship selfobjects. When such selfobjects are also not available within an adolescent's real-life social and family environment, the lack of fictional selfobjects is even more problematic. This concern is reflected in the "We Need Diverse Books" campaign, which "advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people" (We Need Diverse Books, 2015). Self

psychology, along with research on parasocial relationships, adds theoretical grounding and strength to the increased calls for more diversity in media, looking beyond questions of tokenism and representation to a richer understanding of how the cultural landscape shapes individual and group identity.

As adolescents seek to form individuated identities they begin to look outside of their families for selfobjects – especially those that can meet their need for twinship. They often find selfobjects within their peer group, which can be expanded to include fictional characters – especially those in frequently revisited narratives. Just as friendships and romantic relationships take on a special importance and intensity in adolescence, so do relationships with fictional characters. Thus the concept of selfobjects, along with research on parasocial relationships, can help to explain the intense relationship that many adolescents have with favored fictional narratives.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

During adolescence, fictional narratives can play a role in the developmental tasks of identity formation and individuation. Through the transitional experience of engaging with fictional narratives, adolescents can creatively experiment with identity by taking on characters' subjective experience. Fictional characters act as an extension of the peer group, which takes on heightened importance as the adolescent seeks to form an individuated identity that is less dependent on familial ties. Readers and viewers form parasocial relationships with fictional characters that may serve as selfobjects that meet needs for mirroring, idealizing and twinship. The use of fictional selfobjects can help adolescents expand and consolidate their identities. The following sections seek to apply this framework to clinical treatment with adolescent clients, as well as to future research.

Implications for Treatment

In *Playing and Reality* Winnicott (1968) writes, “It is good to remember always that playing is itself a therapy” (p. 597). Play therapy is the preferred method of treatment with children because it allows the child to communicate things to the therapist that may be beyond their linguistic capabilities. In play, the child’s difficulties are represented in displacement, rather than stated directly (Davies, 2011). From a Winnicottian perspective, all therapy is a form of play therapy because, “psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together” in the potential space (Winnicott, 1968, p.591).

Given that engagement with fictional narratives can be an important form of play during adolescence, it seems natural to bring favored narratives into the therapeutic space. While many adolescents have the verbal and cognitive skills to engage in talk therapy, they may be resistant to it for a number of reasons. Often adolescents are present in therapeutic environments against their will, such as when they have been sent by a parent, their school, or the criminal justice system. It is also not unusual for adolescents to distrust adults, either because lack of interest in adults in favor of the peer group, or because of past experiences of being let down by adults who were supposed to help them.

Beginning the therapy by asking an adolescent client to talk about a favorite fictional narrative allows the therapy to take place, at least at first, in displacement. This is unlikely to activate the adolescent client’s defenses in the same way that directly addressing the presenting issue might. Another benefit is that it allows the client to become the “expert.” This has the potential to shift the power dynamic in a way that makes the adolescent more likely to trust and open up to the therapist. Through discussion of the adolescent client’s favored narrative, the therapist and client are playing together in an extension of the client’s playful exploration of the

narrative. In this exchange, the therapist is attuned to the ways that the client may be using the narrative as a space for exploration of her identity, or a means of asserting her individuated sense of self. In particular, the therapist can listen for selfobject transferences to specific characters. For example is there a character that may be in some way meeting the client's need for mirroring, idealizing, or twinship? By drawing out more detail and encouraging the client to explore this relationship, the therapist is helping the client to solidify her use of the selfobject and to articulate what it is that is being taken in, and integrated into her identity. Additionally, the therapist can provide impactful mirroring to the client by acknowledging the special relationship that the client has to this narrative or character, rather than dismissing it as a superficial interest. When the importance of this relationship is validated, the client is empowered in the process of forming her unique, individuated identity.

Suggestions for Future Research

This theoretical study has yielded a number of hypotheses to be tested through future empirical research. Reading fictional narratives can support the developmental tasks of adolescence by providing a way of exploring new possibilities and identities through taking on the experience of another. As a result, I hypothesize that the books we read as adolescents may affect us in more profound ways than the books we read at other times in our lives – an idea that could be investigated through comparative, quantitative, and qualitative methods. Further, I have hypothesized that fictional characters, with which readers and viewers form parasocial relationships, have the potential to serve as selfobjects which contribute to the reader or viewer's cohesive sense of self. Further research is needed to determine whether adolescents truly relate to favored fictional characters in a ways that alter their self-concept. Another area for further research related to the concept of fictional selfobjects is an investigation of the ways that

adolescents from marginalized and oppressed groups may be affected by a lack of twinship selfobjects in popular fictional narratives. Research into this topic has the potential for broad implications for the publishing and film and television industries

Further research can also add to our knowledge of the ways that fictional narratives are currently being used therapeutically with adolescents. An exploratory, qualitative study of clinicians who work with adolescents could provide an overview of the various ways that fictional narratives are, or are not being incorporated into clinical work with adolescents. Case studies – from both individual and group modalities – would provide rich, in-depth examples of how to incorporate fiction into clinical work. Empirical research on all of these topics could contribute significantly to our knowledge of the potentially unique ways that adolescents engage with fictional narratives as well as to our overall understanding of adolescent development.

Conclusion

This theoretical study has attempted to address some of the gaps in the literature related to adolescent identity formation and the psychology of engagement with fictional narratives. First, a brief overview of psychoanalytic models of adolescence was presented, which centered on the developmental processes of identity formation and individuation. Next, literature was reviewed relating to the psychology of fiction and parasocial relationships. This literature review revealed that engagement with fictional narratives allows readers to be transported into fictional worlds, and to take on the experience of characters in ways that may increase empathy. Additionally, readers and viewers form parasocial relationships with fictional characters, which have the potential to fulfill some of the functions of real-life social relationships.

Winnicott's concept of transitional experience, and the concept of selfobjects from Kohut's self psychology, served as useful lenses for looking at the phenomenon of adolescent

engagement with fictional narratives. The act of engaging with a fictional narrative is, according to Winnicott, a transitional experience in that it exists in the potential space between internal subjectivity and external reality. In the potential space, the adolescent reader is able to “try on” the experience of various characters in a way that supports playful experimentation with identity. Engagement with fictional narratives can also lead to the development of parasocial relationships with characters from favored narratives. In this way, characters can become an extension of the adolescent’s peer group, which plays an important role in the individuation process. Fictional characters with whom one has a relationship may also serve as selfobjects which are used to meet needs for mirroring, idealizing and twinship, helping to solidify the adolescent’s sense of self.

My experience working with adolescents like Margaret (the 12-year-old girl discussed in Chapter 1, who loved the *Hunger Games*) showed me that adolescents often have intense and meaningful relationships with favored fictional narratives. In this study I have endeavored to better understand this phenomenon by considering how engagement with fictional narratives – and especially relationships to fictional characters – can support adolescents in processes of individuation and identity formation. My hope is that this study has provided a theoretical framework that can inform the thoughtful incorporation of fictional narratives in clinical work with adolescent clients, as well as further empirical research into the nature of adolescent engagement with fictional narratives.

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