

Cultural Studies Methodologies and Narrative Family Therapy: Therapeutic Conversations About Pop Culture

JULIE TILSEN*
DAVID NYLUND†

Therapists recognize that popular media culture is an influential force that shapes identities and relationships in contemporary society. Indeed, people have serious relationships with the commodities and practices that emerge from pop culture. However, they often lack the conceptual and conversational resources to engage meaningfully with clients about pop culture's influence in their lives. Cultural studies is introduced as an interdisciplinary approach that provides frameworks for both theory and practice that position therapists and clients to critically examine the role of pop culture in their lives. Cultural studies and narrative therapy are discussed as praxis allies that share a populist political intention and counter-hegemonic discursive practices. The integration of cultural studies methodologies into narrative therapy practice with a parent and her teenage daughter is illustrated through a case vignette.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; Popular Culture; Narrative Therapy; Text; Polysemic; Meaning-Making

Fam Proc 55:225–237, 2016

Pop culture shapes our ideas of what is normal and what our dreams can be.

Gloria Steinem

There is no question that popular culture is ubiquitous in contemporary society. Technology, fashion, music, social media, films, and video games are front and center in people's lives, exerting influence on identities and relationships. As such, pop culture is something to contend with in therapy. But how?

Narrative therapy has always looked beyond the bounds of the theories and conceptual frameworks that inform conventional therapeutic practices. In particular, narrative therapists are interested in theoretical ideas that challenge essentialist notions of identity and support resistance to specifications of prevailing discourses. Conceptual resources imbued with these qualities promote discursive practices that are generative and hope-full. The field of cultural studies provides both conceptual and conversational resources that support such a practice.

In this article, we will provide a brief introduction to the field of cultural studies and discuss its affinity with narrative therapy practice. We will focus on the ways in which

*International Center for Clinical Excellence, Minneapolis, MN.

†Social Work, California State University-Sacramento, Sacramento, CA.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Julie Tilsen, International Center for Clinical Excellence, 3609 Harriet Ave, Minneapolis, MN 55409. E-mails: julie@2stories.com, julie.tilsen@gmail.com.

cultural studies methodologies offer a rich and productive approach to addressing people's relationships with the commodities of the culture industries. Our focus is on demonstrating methodologies that provide family therapists tools to engage with people in more nuanced conversations about the effects of pop culture and ways to respond to these effects; our intention is not to render our own analyses of any particular popular text. Cultural studies will be discussed as a praxis ally with narrative therapy that legitimates clinical attention to pop culture while fostering client agency. Examples of cultural studies-informed questions and a case vignette will be used to illustrate the application of these ideas to therapeutic practice.

AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL STUDIES

I think it's always important for academics to study pop culture.

Joss Whedon

Cultural studies is an innovative field of research and teaching that investigates the ways in which culture creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power. As an interdisciplinary field, cultural studies draws on methods and theories from literary studies, sociology, communication studies, history, cultural anthropology, and economics (Barker, 2012). Cultural studies researchers often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and/or gender. A key feature of cultural studies is examining its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms, and to analyze the social and political context in which culture manifests itself.

For example, not only would a cultural studies scholar study an object or media text¹ but she/he would also connect this study to a larger, progressive political project such as studying TV representations of gay youth that reinforce homophobic stereotypes and support heterosexist policies. In addition, cultural studies attempts to expose and reconcile the division of knowledge between tacit cultural knowledge and objective (universal) forms of knowledge. Lastly, it has a commitment to an ethical evaluation of modern society and to a radical line of political action. In these ways, cultural studies shares many of the same political intentions as does narrative therapy.

Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and systems through which culture is produced and consumed. Therefore, the study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. Cultural studies shows how media culture articulates dominant cultural ideologies.² It conceives of American culture and society as a contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance (Kellner, 1995). As a conceptual framework, cultural studies is valuable because it provides tools for critical media literacy and interpretation of culture. Informed by a critical, multicultural, and multiperspective approach, cultural studies invites people to become more sensitive to how relations of power and domination are encoded in cultural texts, such as those of television, film, and video games. It also provides skills for resistance to these dominant encoded meanings, as well as methods for the construction of alternative preferred readings. As such, it points to moments of resistance, contradiction, and criticism within media culture and thus helps promote development of more critical consciousness.

¹Text refers to anything that produces meaning.

²We are using "media culture" and "popular culture" interchangeably.

The Three-pronged Approach of Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is not necessarily a distinct academic discipline. Rather, cultural studies borrows from various disciplines and methodologies. In relationship with popular culture, cultural studies uses a three-part analysis to critically examine popular culture or a media text (Ang, 1996). This comprehensive approach avoids too narrowly focusing on one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others. To avoid such limitations (such as those rendered by effects studies³), cultural studies first examines how media texts are produced and distributed (known as political economy approaches). The second area of inquiry involves the meanings and messages encoded in those texts (through textual analysis), and the third area of focus is on the meanings that consumers make of cultural texts (through audience reception studies).

We can look at each of these domains more closely by considering some possible questions one could ask. For example, an investigation of *political economy* might include questions such as:

- Who do you suppose makes the decisions about who is the shooter and who gets shot in these games?
- How much does it matter to the companies that market these games that gender and racial stereotypes are reinforced?
- If your family were to advise the video game companies, what changes would you tell them to make?

The point of this line of inquiry is to promote consideration of the values and intentions behind the production and distribution of popular culture commodities, and to encourage consumer agency over those values through critical reflection and deconstruction. Investigation into political economy resonates with the narrative therapy focus on situating individual experiences within broader discursive frames.

Textual analysis facilitates consideration of the messages encoded within media texts and the values these messages promote. Some questions one could ask include:

- What activities does this film suggest are acceptable for girls, and what activities are ok for boys?
- How would you describe the kinds of people who get to have some authority or influence over their own lives in this film?
- What happens to people in this story who don't accept the roles they're given?

Textual analysis is a process of deconstructing and decoding the encoded messages embedded within media texts (Hall, 1973). Narrative therapy relies heavily on deconstruction (Derrida, 1967) as a means to unhinge textual certainties, thus revealing the influence of prevailing discourses. Textual analysis works in much the same way.

Finally, examples of questions from the area of audience analysis and meaning-making include:

- Despite your concerns about the class and gender messages, what keeps you interested in this band?
- What experiences have you had that contribute to how you understand the lyrics?

³Effects studies isolate and analyze a single media text (e.g., a song lyric) for the (assumed) harmful effects it has on users, rendering a universal, one-size-fits-all interpretation, without ever asking the consumer what meanings they make of the text (Gauntlett, 1998).

- Have you ever changed the lyrics up a bit and come up with some different versions of the song?

These questions open discursive space for individual meaning-making and often lead to transgressive readings of hegemonic messages within media texts. This is akin to narrative therapy's re-authoring practice.

This comprehensive three-prong approach to studying media culture provides critical and political perspectives that enable consumers to dissect the meanings, messages, and effects of dominant cultural forms. Cultural studies is thus part of a critical media pedagogy that empowers people in their struggle for both individual agency and political change.

POP CULTURE: WHAT YOU THINK IT IS . . . AND SO MUCH MORE

I'm kind of a pop culture stew. Q-Tip

There are many ways to answer the question, "what is popular culture?" and of course the answer will depend on who is answering and how they are socially and politically positioned. One way that we answer this question is: "Pop culture includes all consumer commodities that share broad popularity among everyday people within a culture." This would include commodities and practices such as: music, fashion trends, sports, technology and social media, video games, film and TV, and social practices such as language vernaculars (e.g., "on fleek" or "totes") and memes. We would add that all of these commodities and practices constitute *texts*, wherein *text* is anything that produces meaning, and that these texts are shared widely among people (that is, they are popular). While these answers are central to our understanding of pop culture, as cultural studies-informed narrative therapists, we prefer a richer and more complex response to this important question, one that stimulates a generative narrative practice.

When considering the meaning of *popular culture*, it is helpful to begin with an examination of the history of the word *culture*. Williams (1981, 1983) traces the origin of the word to agricultural processes involved with growing crops. The notion of *cultivation* later came to refer to the enhancement of the human mind and spirit, leading to elitist notions of cultured people. Arnold (1960) juxtaposed this bourgeois constitution of culture (what some refer to as *high culture*) with the "anarchy" of the "uncultivated masses" (p. 6). This is often referred to as *low culture*. Culture was defined by its aesthetic value—whether it was good or bad—as judged from an elitist perspective. Thus, culture was not something available to, or participated in by, the masses.

Cultural studies emerged in resistance to this idea that culture was defined as "good or bad" based on the aesthetic values of the bourgeoisie. Promoting an anthropological approach to culture, cultural studies champions a focus on the everyday lived experience of people—that which is popular, not that which is exclusive. This includes consideration of the arts in everyday life, and valuing creativity and change as well as tradition. Furthermore, as an anthropological approach, a cultural studies treatment of culture emphasizes not only the ordinariness of culture, but also the social practices people engage in to make meaning of culture. Cultural studies explicitly positions its inquiry as a project of social justice by embracing a populist ethos that honors people's capacities to engage critically and politically with pop culture (Barker, 2012).

Thus, when we consider the question "what is pop culture?" we are particularly interested in answering this from the perspective of cultural studies. It is from this standpoint that we may engage in understandings of pop culture that further a generative narrative

practice, one which positions us to engage meaningfully with clients around their relationships with pop culture. In fact, we suggest that there is a more productive question one may ask when inquiring about pop culture, and that is: “*What does pop culture do and what are the effects of this doing?*” Within a poststructural/constructionist frame, defining culture is less the focus than understanding “how the language of culture is used and for what purposes” (Barker, 2012, p. 39). This intentionally political question about power⁴ is at the heart of not only our narrative practice but also of the ongoing social controversy about the effects of pop culture on young people.

The Popular Controversy

The contestation of the merits of pop culture is reflected in the language used to signify it by those occupying opposing perspectives. Within the sphere of cultural studies, we refer to *popular culture* because this term reflects the populist spirit of the discipline, as well as regard for the local meaning-making capabilities of consumers. Critics of this perspective typically use the term *mass culture* and emphasize the influence of the *culture industries* rather than that of consumers (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979). Tilsen (2013) and Tilsen and Nylund (2009) summarize the central point of contention as this: Are people passive, uncritical consumers of mass-produced, message-saturated images over whom the culture industries exert ultimate power? Or, are people more accurately considered to be an interactive audience, holding interpretive agency to critique as well as produce meaning as they engage with texts from the culture industries?

The former position represents the Marxist critique of the culture industries articulated by the Frankfurt School, as represented by Adorno & Horkheimer (1979) and Adorno (1991). This perspective maintains that people are duped by the culture industries into buying mass-produced commodities, and that they are incapable of critiquing the messages inherent in mass culture texts. Furthermore, people are manipulated by the culture industries into believing in the illusion that consumption of mass culture commodities and participation in the social practices surrounding them enhances individuality. The Frankfurt school asserts that the culture industries foster the opposite of individuality; rather, mass culture promotes standardization. Central to this view is the focus on the production end of the culture industries. This focus maintains that consumers are influenced only by the texts embedded within commodities by the producers of them. Thus, people are rendered as passive consumers of mass meaning, not as active producers of fluid, diverse meanings. This position can be seen reflected, for example, when it is assumed that interest in commercial rap music *only* reinforces homophobic and misogynistic attitudes or that getting a tattoo is *only* conforming to a trend du jour and will later be regretted.

Contrary to the Frankfurt School’s analysis, cultural studies theorists such as Hall (1997), Fiske (1989a, 1989b), Willis (1990), and Gauntlett (2008) argue that people are more than consumers of mass-produced culture, and that meaning can be made not only at the point of production but also through consumption. When interacting with popular culture, people hold interpretive agency that positions them as both consumers and producers of culture through the meanings that they generate. Some of these meanings may stand in resistance to dominating discourses and the influence of the culture industries (Gauntlett, 2008; Hall, 1997) as people construct unique meanings that are situated within their lives. As with their relationships with most things, people engage with popular culture in complex and fluid ways that reflect the polysemic nature of cultural texts and the “multiplicity of their identities and the social locations they occupy” (Tilsen, 2013, p. 86).

⁴This is a political question about power because it is about discourse and what discourse does. We define discourse as: what gets to be said, by whom, with what authority, and with what effects.

For example I (JT) met with a 15-year-old and his parents about his activities on social media (in this case, Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook). Like many parents, they expressed concern about their child's potential vulnerability to exploitation on the Internet. Their concerns were heightened because their son was gender nonconforming and on the autism spectrum, two aspects of his identity that potentially increased his vulnerability. They acknowledged their concerns were provoked by news stories about adults preying on youth on social media.

We discussed the meanings inherent in these news stories, where they came from, and how these meanings had marginalized the multistoried history they shared around teaching their son how to stay socially safer. In this way, the parents moved from passive to active, and from engaging with a single meaning to considering multiple meanings situated within their own richly storied history of parenting a young person with nonnormative needs. Furthermore, the parents learned from their son about his activities on social media, including how he was using their lessons about social safety. Coming to understand how their son was making meaning of his interactions allowed the parents to view him as critically active rather than passively uncritical. They especially came to appreciate how much of his social media involvement centered on news and activism for neuro- and gender nonconforming people. Had my practice been informed by the Frankfurt School, the interpretive agency of these parents and their son would have gone unacknowledged and they would have been disenfranchised from their own experiences and knowledges.

Cultural Studies and Narrative Therapy: Praxis Allies

When considering the view of the Frankfurt School versus that of cultural studies, we are drawn to the latter for a variety of reasons. First, a cultural studies understanding of popular culture recognizes people's agency as producers of meaning who hold the capacity to critique the normative texts promoted by the culture industries. Central to this is cultural studies' constructionist foundation, which stands in contrast to the Frankfurt School's essentialist embrace of grand narratives. Furthermore, the notion that people can construct alternative meanings that resist those generated from sites of cultural hegemony aligns with the Foucauldian understanding of power operations that informs narrative practice. This poststructural analysis of power is reflected in Foucault's (1978) observation that "where there is power there is resistance" (p. 95).

Foucault's noting of resistance is fundamental to cultural studies honoring people's capacity for critical consumption of popular culture (de Certeau, 1984). Cultural studies scholar Storey (2003) argues that North American citizens cannot rise above consumer culture. Storey posits that as popular culture is ubiquitous in North American and European societies, all citizens interact with popular culture in some way, even if one attempts to resist or ignore it. Hence, Storey suggests that given popular culture's pervasiveness, all citizens, regardless of social location, are shaped by popular culture. However, as Storey and other cultural studies scholars suggest (Barker, 2012; Fiske, 2010; Ryan, 2010), citizens are not mindless consumers of popular culture; people can engage critically with popular culture for empowerment purposes. For example, I (DN) worked with an adolescent "coming out" who utilized Harry Potter as support for his sexual identity; he related to Harry feeling like an outsider to mainstream "muggle" society (Nylund, 2007).⁵

Other ways that the cultural studies perspective supports the values of a narrative practice include:

⁵A muggle is a person in the Harry Potter stories who does not have magical powers (Rowling, 1997).

- An emphasis on social justice that views people as political actors;
- Rejection of binaries (e.g., high/low culture);
- Both/and view of the effects of pop culture as potentially harmful and productive;
- Resistance to elitist constitutions of culture based on universalized notions of aesthetic value, and thus rejection of essentialist grand narratives;
- Focus on power operations rather than aesthetics;
- Privileging of local knowledge over universal forms of knowledge;
- Recognition that texts are fluid and polysemic;
- Exoticizing the domestic (Bordieu, 1988; White, 1993).

While the theoretical compatibility of cultural studies and narrative therapy is apparent, one may ask, why is it important to engage with clients around their consumption of popular culture? To begin with, there is power, discourse, and cultural hegemony. Monk, Winslade, and Sinclair (2008) assert that popular culture is “perhaps the most powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity today” (p. 243), as horizontal culture (culture circulated among peers) has upstaged vertical culture (passed on generationally through families) (Maalouf, 2000). We agree that pop culture has achieved hegemonic status as a dominating discourse. As such, we would ask therapists, why *wouldn't* you engage clients in conversations about their relationships with pop culture?

The messages embedded within pop culture provide some of the very “stuff” that people use to construct their identities. These messages are saturated with ideas about race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity, and most often reify dominant norms and specifications. These dominant norms reflect the discourses of:

- Capitalism/consumerism;
- Beauty & body specifications;
- Patriarchy;
- Hegemonic masculinity;
- White supremacy;
- Ableism;
- Heteronormativity, homonormativity, and cisnormativity; and
- Ageism.

As narrative therapists, we are interested in discourse and how its operations influence the identity conclusions and performances available to people. People have relationships with pop culture—it's impossible not to in contemporary society. These relationships with pop culture implicitly influence people's other relationships, including those with the most important people in their lives. As cultural studies scholars suggest (Barker, 2012; Fiske, 2010; Ryan, 2010), all North American families are situated within the landscape of corporate-consumer-capitalism, and—regardless of their class, racial, gender, or sexual identity—are relentlessly faced with navigating the terrain shaped by media images and popular messages about identity, lifestyle, and what a “good” and “normal” family looks like.⁶

For example, can we seriously address issues of gender and sexuality, including concerns such as: couples' decisions about and practices around the division of labor

⁶Claiming that all North American are influenced by consumer capitalism may at first glance seem to be a broad, sweeping claim. However, we argue (along with other cultural studies researchers) that consumer capitalism permeates North American society. As consumer capitalism is omnipresent, the focus should be on examining how popular culture impacts people differently depending on their social location. In following this line of argument, we argue that family therapists need to discuss popular culture with all of their clients and families, regardless of their various identities.

and parenting; how men experience and express feelings; or the challenges queer and transgender people face without taking up the messages communicated through pop culture—and those that our clients may construct in response? Is it possible to support families struggling under financial pressures without examining the role of media images and the narrative these promote in regard to the myth of meritocracy and what success looks like? We believe that we would be remiss if we failed to consider the impact of consumer culture and people's relationships with it.

As a dialogical practice relying heavily on the deconstruction of meta-narratives and the discursive production of multiple texts, a cultural studies-informed practice provides opportunities for people to cultivate media literacy skills (Nylund, 2007; Tilsen & Nylund, 2009). This is another important reason to address pop culture with clients: These skills are useful beyond the consulting room, providing people with conceptual and conversational resources that assist them in engaging critically with a world full of texts produced by the culture industries.

Partnering with clients in the deconstruction of media texts and intentional construction of alternative meanings provides rich soil for the cultivation of a multiplicity of identity conclusions. As such, it makes good clinical sense. In fact, when we have presented these ideas at workshops and in consultation, therapists resonate with the idea that popular culture is an important aspect of contemporary life. They agree that addressing it in session would be potentially productive and meaningful. Yet, they rarely extend their discussions of pop culture beyond “joining” activities because they feel they lack “permission” to do so. We suggest that this lack of permission stems from the absence of theoretical and methodological frameworks that lend legitimacy to therapeutic conversations about pop culture. We contend that cultural studies offers the conceptual resources that legitimize a thorough exploration of pop culture into clinical work.

CULTURAL STUDIES IN THERAPEUTIC ACTION: CASE VIGNETTE

You have to be respectful of pop culture because people interpret it in the way they want. Jaleel White

How are these concepts and methodologies integrated in therapeutic practice? In what way does engaging with clients and their relationships with pop culture make clinical sense? Consider the following case example of Cheryl and her teen daughter, Kelly.

Kelly, a 16-year-old, white, middle-class, able-bodied person, was referred to me (DN) by Cheryl, Kelly's mother. I work as a clinician at the Gender Health Center (GHC), a counseling agency in Sacramento, California, that serves the LGBTQ communities. Cheryl found out about the Gender Health Center through the local LGBTQ newspaper—an article on the GHC's specialty in working with transgender youth and their families.⁷ At our first meeting I invited Cheryl, a single parent, to join Kelly and me in the interview. I informed Kelly that I was a family therapist who specialized in transgender youth and their families.

In our first session, I learned that Kelly was assigned female at birth but identified as genderqueer. Genderqueer persons challenge or live outside the gender binary, as they are not exclusively male or female. Genderqueer persons' gender and sexual identities

⁷Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose sex assigned at birth does not match up with their gender identity.

tend to be less static and more open to fluidity. Kelly preferred male or gender-neutral pronouns.⁸ Cheryl initiated the counseling after Kelly shared with her that he was pansexual.^{9,10} Cheryl wanted to support Kelly but felt confused, saying, “I could handle it if she¹¹ came out as a lesbian or bisexual but I don’t get this pansexual thing.”

In our first meeting, I explored Kelly’s preferences and the meanings Kelly made of his identities. I was curious to understand how pansexual and genderqueer resonated with Kelly. I was particularly interested in Kelly’s agency; to inhabit such nonnormative identities is an act of cultural resistance to heteronormativity, homonormativity, and our culture’s gender binary system. Kelly’s claim to such identities within a gender system that polices nonbinarism reflects Kelly’s partnership with certain qualities and values that suggest bravery and courage. Narrative therapy uses questions to inquire about social and relational history of preferred qualities and values. Here is an excerpt from our conversation:

David [to Kelly]

Who supports your courage in fighting against our gender binary system?

Kelly

Well, many of my friends. . .but one person for sure is Snow White.

David

Snow White! [I have a puzzled look on my face] I have to admit I was not expecting Snow White to be an ally for your genderqueer identity. Snow White seems to be the epitome of a traditional female.

Kelly

I know she’s like all pure and innocent.

At his point in the interview, Kelly and I engaged in a textual analysis of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. My intent at this part of the interview was to invite Kelly to critically examine how Snow White’s representation colludes with dominant ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality. Both narrative therapy and cultural studies offer therapists tools in deconstructing dominant discourses:

David

Could you say more about the messages and images of Snow White that fit with traditional femininity?

Kelly

Well, I loved the Disney movies as a kid, especially *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. But as I got older, I realized that the movies were telling women that they needed to be with a man to be worth anything. Plus her thinness gives young girls negative messages about their bodies.

David

What effect do you think Snow White’s images have had on you?

Kelly

I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn’t feel like a girl. I kept his secret and felt bad about my body.

As the interview continued, Kelly moved from a textual analysis of Snow White to a critique of the Disney Corporation:

Kelly

Disney is just a big company that is only interested in making money and selling bad ideas to young girls.

David

So, you’re talking about who produces movies like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*? [Kelly nods yes]. Who do think wrote and made those movies?

⁸We will use male pronouns throughout this article for consistency in reading.

⁹Some genderqueer people prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns while others prefer the binary pronouns, her or him. Some genderqueer people prefer both he and she, and some prefer to use only their name and not use pronouns at all

¹⁰Pansexual refers to sexual or emotional attraction toward people of any sex or gender identity.

¹¹Cheryl was still using female pronouns despite Kelly’s request for gender-neutral or male pronouns.

Kelly White cis [gender] men of course!

Kelly's comments are aligned with cultural studies scholar Henry Giroux's political economy analysis of the Disney conglomerate. In his book, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Giroux (2001) suggests that Disney masquerades with a cloak of innocence and entertainment, while simultaneously exercising its influence as a major force on global economics and reinforcing oppressive discourses about race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Cultural studies scholars posit that any text is *polysemic*, that is, open to multiple interpretations, not just one "true" meaning (Hebdige, 1979). All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader or consumer. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. Hence, I was intrigued with how Kelly made meaning of the Snow White movie that served his interest as a gender fluid person. Following my curiosity involved an inquiry process known as audience analysis, one domain within the three-pronged approach discussed previously:

David Kelly, you were saying how Snow White embodies some of the problems associated with traditional femininity. Help me understand how you have interpreted Snow White to support your queerness?

Kelly I know this is weird but I think Snow was a secret feminist!

David [Kelly, Cheryl, and I are all laughing] Hmm, that's quite a stretch. Are you saying that you "read" Snow White as a feminist in the closet?

Kelly Yep! In the movie, Snow White does need to be saved at almost every point. But she is strong and smart and makes friends with the forest animals and asks them for help. She also doesn't bitch and moan through the movie but keeps a positive attitude. That positive attitude is a strength not many people have.

David I see, but what about Snow White's thinness and unrealistic beauty standards?

Kelly Yeah, people do think she is gorgeous, and her face saved her life once. But that's not how she keeps her friends. Her strong personality is what really makes her friendship with the dwarfs so long.

Kelly's interpretation of Snow White is what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall said is an "oppositional reading" of the text. In Hall's (1973) classic essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse", he offers a theoretical approach of how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Hall suggests that audience members decode the text from three different positions: dominant/hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. The dominant reading is one where the consumer takes the actual meaning directly, and decodes it exactly the way it was encoded. The consumer is located within the dominant point of view. The negotiated reading is a mixture of accepting and rejecting elements. Audience members are acknowledging the dominant textual messages, but are not willing to completely accept it the way the encoder intended (The Disney Corporation and the writers of the *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are the encoders in the animated Disney movie). In the oppositional reading position, a consumer's social location has placed them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant textual reading, and although they understand the intended meaning, they do not share the text's code and end up rejecting it. Often persons from marginalized communities engage in

oppositional readings for empowerment. Kelly's oppositional reading of *Snow White* assists him in claiming and celebrating a nondominant gender identity.

Cheryl was listening intently to Kelly's analysis. I asked Cheryl what impacted her about Kelly's analysis:

Cheryl I'm impressed with Kelly's thoughts! I always knew he was bright [this was the first time that Cheryl used Kelly's preferred pronoun].

David What do think it says about you as his mother?

Cheryl I guess it says that I did something right!

David Do you think in some way you contributed to Kelly's courage and bravery to become his own person and not live by traditional gender norms?

Cheryl I'm not sure. I guess so.

David What do you think, Kelly? How has your mom supported you to find your bravery?

Kelly She always told me to follow my heart and to be my own person.

The above excerpt highlights narrative questions that invite Cheryl to re-author her story about identity as a mother. In addition, my inquiry underscores the relational connection between Kelly and Cheryl.

As the session continued, I explored the meanings that Cheryl made of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; hers was of a dominant position. Cheryl acknowledged that *Snow White* and other Disney characters like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty had a huge influence on the shaping of her gender identity. Cheryl agreed with Kelly's views that Disney movies reinforced problematic gender stereotypes. "I have to admit that watching those movies had a big impact on me. . . especially that a Prince would come rescue me," Cheryl said. She continued, "And look what happened to me—my Prince didn't rescue me, he beat me." Cheryl's poignant comment was in reference to her ex-husband, Kelly's father. Our conversation led to a rich deconstruction of the impact of dominant gender norms. *Snow White*, as a text, became a linking point for Cheryl and Kelly to talk about the social construction of gender.

Cheryl also shared that escaping into the fictional world of a Disney movie was a meaningful diversion for her from the violence that occurred in her childhood. Cheryl grew up in a home where her father was emotionally and physically abusive to her mother. I asked Cheryl to consider that Disney movie-watching was a covert strategy to comfort herself in a violent home. Cheryl's story of watching Disney movies to minimize the effects of the abuse enabled Kelly to have new-found respect for his mother.

Having a multilayered conversation, informed by narrative therapy and cultural studies, about *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* created space to have a conversation about gender, violence, and covert responses to abuse. In addition, engaging in critical analysis of *Snow White* became a connecting opportunity for Cheryl and Kelly in spite of their very different meanings. Soon after the session, Cheryl and Kelly started attending a support group at the Gender Health Center for genderqueer and nonbinary persons and their families.

TOWARD A CULTURAL STUDIES-INFORMED NARRATIVE PRACTICE

Everybody knows that I'm not a snob when it comes to pop culture. Diablo Cody

People have important relationships with the stuff of popular culture. As relational therapists, our interest in these relationships can facilitate conversations that bring forward

stories of personal agency and creativity, and position us as witnesses to acts of political resistance and courage. Furthermore, popular culture is a dominating discourse in contemporary society. As such, it makes sense for family therapists to approach it with the same regard as other discursive contexts within which people live their lives, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, age, and religion. Indeed, pop culture intersects with these identity-shaping discourses in powerful ways that demand clinical sophistication and relational sensitivity.

Consequently, we believe that it would be helpful if family therapy training programs would incorporate cultural studies into the core curriculum. As has been illustrated, cultural studies provides relational therapists with the conceptual and conversational resources for clinically meaningful work. Cultural studies serves as a fitting praxis ally with narrative therapy; they share many theoretical foundations that are brought into therapeutic action through inquiry based on deconstruction and meaning-making. Folding the three-pronged approach reviewed herein into narrative therapy instruction would be theoretically coherent while also providing trainees with specific skills to practice.

We think such a curriculum could help family therapists be more self-reflexive about their relationship with popular culture. For example, family therapists might reflect back on what pop culture texts were shaping of their own identities. Being critical of one's own interaction with popular culture can assist practitioners in entering deconstructive conversations with their clients.

From its beginnings, family therapy has championed a contextual view of people. In order to keep this commitment to understanding people in relationship with the discursive worlds they live in, it is important that family therapy be intentional in its attention to the significant role popular culture plays in society today.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (1991). *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1979). *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Ang, A. (1996). *Living room wars: Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. New York: Routledge.
- Arnold, M. (1960). *Culture and anarchy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Barker, C. (2012). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*, 4th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of every day life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida, J. (1967). *Of grammatology* (G.C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fiske, J. (1989a). *Understanding popular culture*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Fiske, J. (1989b). *Reading the popular*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Fiske, J. (2010). *The John Fiske collection: Understanding popular culture*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*. New York: Pantheon. (Originally published in 1976).
- Gauntlett, D. (1998). Ten things wrong with the 'effects' model. In R. Dickinson, R. Harindranath, & L. Olga (Eds.), *Approaches to audiences: A reader* (pp. 120–130). New York: Edward Arnold.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, gender, and identity: An introduction*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (2001). *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hall, S. (1997). Cultural identity and diaspora. In K. Woodward (Ed.), *Identity and difference* (pp. 51–59). London: Sage.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. New York: Methuen.
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity, and politics between the modern and postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Maalouf, A. (2000). *On identity*. London: Routledge.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., & Sinclair, S. (2008). *New horizons in multicultural counseling*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Nylund, D. (2007). Reading Harry Potter: Popular culture, queer theory, and the fashioning of youth identity. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 26(2), 13–24.

- Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.
- Ryan, M. (2010). *Cultural studies: A practical introduction*. New York: Wiley.
- Storey, J. (2003). *Cultural studies and the study of popular culture*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press.
- Tilsen, J. (2013). *Therapeutic conversations with queer youth: Transcending homonormativity and constructing preferred identities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tilsen, J., & Nylund, D. (2009). Popular culture texts and young people: Making meaning, honouring resistance, and becoming Harry Potter. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 2, 3–10.
- White, M. (1993). Deconstruction in therapy. In S. Gillian & R. Price (Eds.), *Therapeutic conversations* (pp. 22–61). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Williams, R. (1981). *Culture*. London: Fontana.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords*. London: Fontana.
- Willis, P. (1990). *Common culture*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.