Equity Through Understanding: Using Science Fiction and Fantasy to Enhance Empathy

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Learning Objectives
Counselor educators and graduate students who attend this session will:
1. Learn about using works of science fiction and fantasy to help counselors-in-training/students enhance empathy;
2. Learn to apply specific techniques used in bibliotherapy and narrative therapy; and
3. Learn about the importance of promoting empathetic understanding in counselors-in-training/students.

Abstract
Empathy is critical for developing positive social relationships, so how can school counselors facilitate this growth in an appealing manner for students? One way would be by using science fiction and fantasy. Join us to discuss such works as Doctor Who, Star Trek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Twilight Zone, etc., and how they can help enhance empathy to increase equity. Whether you prefer to beam up or roam cemeteries late at night, you are sure to have a good time!

Overview and Importance of Empathy
• Young (2017) defined empathy as being able to “grasp the facts, the feelings, and the significance of another person’s story; more important, empathy involves the ability to convey your accurate perceptions to the other person” (p. 39).
• Young went on to assert that empathy was critical to combat cultural/gender differences that may lead to prejudices and racism.
• Rogers (1957/1992) indicated that empathy was a necessary condition for therapeutic change in psychotherapy.
• Myers (1998) stated that the counselor’s role was to help clients “process their reactions [to the stories] in an intentional manner” (p. 244).

Definitions of Science Fiction
• Isaac Asimov (1981) “[Science fiction is] that branch of literature that deals with human responses to changes in the level of science and technology” (p. 7).
• Aldiss and Wingrove (1986): “Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge” (p. 25).
• Ray Bradbury (2004): “Science fiction is the art of the possible, not the art of the impossible” (p. 170).
• David Brin (2008): “[Science fiction is] the literature of exploration and change. While other genres obsess upon so-called eternal verities, science fiction deals with the possibility that our children may have different problems” (p. 186).
• Arthur C. Clarke (1999): “Attempting to define science fiction [is] an undertaking almost as difficult, though not so popular, as trying to define pornography...In both pornography and sf, the problem lies in knowing exactly where to draw the line” (p. 398).

Resonance of Science Fiction
Bal and Veltcamp (2013), Black and Barnes (2015); Johnson et al. (2013); Kidd and Castano (2013), and Outley (2014) found empirical support for fiction promoting empathy both in the short and long terms and in varying formats.

Using Science Fiction and Fantasy
• “Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the awareness of and the ability to interpret the mental states and emotions of others” (Black & Barnes, 2015, p. 423).
• Rubin (1978) lauded bibliotherapy as an “activity which utilizes the strength of literature for the purposes of understanding, insight, and self-growth” (p. 1).
• Halsted (2002) proposed developmental bibliotherapy to be “used preventatively, attempting to anticipate and meet needs before they become problems” (p. 108); this technique can also be applied to other media forms.

Four Phases:
• Identification (with character)
• Catharsis (via resolution of difficult situation)
• Insight (by applying character’s situation)
• Universalization (by recognizing that one is not alone in difficulties)

Learning the art of helping: Building blocks and techniques

Themes include: prejudice, discrimination, racism, etc.

Series premise is a young woman and her friends fighting monsters and saving the world.

Example: “Eye of the Beholder” (1959 Series; Season 2, Episode 6):
• A woman waits to see if her state mandated treatment has made her socially acceptable.
• Themes include: perspectives, differences, body image, etc.

References

Star Trek: The Original Series (TOS)
• Series premise is a futuristic starship crew exploring the universe and interacting with aliens.
• Series streaming on many platforms: Amazon Prime, Hulu, CBS All Access, and Netflix.
• Example: “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield”; Season 3, Episode 15:
  o The crew encounter a political refugee and his pursuer; they eventually make it back to their home world where lessons were and are unforeseen.
• Themes include: prejudice, discrimination, racism, etc.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer
• Series premise is a young woman and her friends fighting monsters and saving the world.
• Series streaming on Hulu.
• Example: “Wrecked”; Season 6, Episode 10:
  o Willow, a witch, becomes addicted to black magic and injures a friend as well as her relationships.
• Themes include: effect of addictions, relationship dynamics, coping mechanisms, etc.

The Twilight Zone
• Series is an anthology with various themes by notable science fiction authors.
• Series streaming on Amazon Prime, Hulu, CBS All Access, and Netflix.
• Example: “The Eye of the Beholder” (1959 Series, Season 2, Episode 6):
  o A woman waits to see if her state-mandated treatment has made her socially acceptable.
  o Themes include: perspectives, differences, body image, etc.