

READING HARRY POTTER: POPULAR CULTURE, QUEER THEORY AND THE FASHIONING OF YOUTH IDENTITY

DAVID NYLUND, PH.D.
California State University, Sacramento

Popular culture provides materials out of which people create their identities. Since it plays such a prominent role in current society, particularly with youth, it is crucial for clinicians to engage with popular culture as a therapeutic tool. This article espouses some of the key tenets of the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, a useful methodology in analyzing popular culture and the mass media. Paying attention to how therapy clients make meaning of media texts can be a powerful therapeutic tool. A case example with a gay youth, Steven—who inserts himself into the text of the Harry Potter stories—illustrates a cultural studies-informed therapeutic approach that draws both upon cultural studies methods and a strong theoretical partner, queer theory. By using a queer cultural studies viewpoint, Steven uncovered some of the hidden “queer” readings and messages in the Harry Potter books that helped him find support for his own sexual identity.

In contemporary society, popular media culture is the dominant culture. The culture industries (organizations that produce and distribute art, entertainment, and/or information) produce images and messages that provide the very materials out of which people constitute their identities (Barker, 2000). Media images supply the models out of which people construct their sense of gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality, and ethnicity. Media stories also provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of people in contemporary global, capitalist societies. Media culture helps induce individuals to identify with dominant discourses, values, institutions, and practices (Miller, 2001).

Since media and consumer culture is so ubiquitous, it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and critique its meanings and messages. In contemporary

This paper was accepted by Cheryl Storm, Outgoing Editor, and Jim Duvall, Incoming Editor. Address correspondence to David Nylund, Ph.D., 6000 J St., Sacramento, CA 95819. E-mail: dknylund@csus.edu.

culture, the culture industries are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy; they contribute to how we conform to the dominant systems of norms and influence what we desire and what we think, feel, and believe. Hence, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals in learning how to cope with a seductive consumer culture environment. Learning how to critique and resist media manipulation can help create a context for self-empowerment giving people more power over their cultural environment.

Because therapy clients are embedded in consumer culture, popular culture plays a prominent role in their daily lives. Yet, critically examining popular and media culture has largely remained on the margins of therapy practice. In this article I discuss the potential contributions of a cultural studies-informed approach to therapy. I argue that cultural studies offers therapists a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to thinking about the complex and, often, contradictory effects of media culture and how clients interact daily with the constant barrage of media images.

One of the key ideas in cultural studies is that while the media does induce individuals to conform to dominant culture, it can also provide resources that create the potential context for self-empowerment. A cultural studies approach embraces and examines these contradictory perspectives, leaving open the possibility for a proliferation of meanings. It has been my experience that popular culture provides a resourceful entry point into clients' worlds by providing material to create their own appropriations of mass-produced culture. I have worked with many youth that use the media to invent their own meaning, identities, and forms of life. Through a case example I demonstrate how I used a queer cultural studies-informed approach with a young man, Steven, to assist him in his own sexual identity construction. Next, I discuss the central tenets of cultural studies (and its link to a theoretical ally, queer theory) and its potential usefulness in therapy.

CULTURAL STUDIES' POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THERAPY

Cultural studies is a broad-based, critical approach to studying subjectivity and power—"how human subjects are formed and how they experience cultural and social space" (Miller, 2001, p. 1). Cultural studies draws from the fields of anthropology, sociology, gender studies, feminism, literary criticism, history, and psychoanalysis in order to examine contemporary media texts and cultural practices (Barker, 2000; Fiske, 1987; Kellner, 1995; McRobbie, 1994; Miller, 2001). Many of the key ideas in cultural studies are derived from the social theories of Antonio Gramsci (1992) and Michel Foucault (1980). Cultural studies argues that the study of culture cannot be divorced from its political and social context; that research into culture is intimately bound up with the role that gender, class, race, sexuality, and nation play in everyday life. Consequently, cultural studies are not one of value-free scholarship but one committed to social justice. Cultural stud-

ies, due to its interdisciplinary and post-structuralist scope (and emphasis on social justice), is connected to the tradition of thought and values that inform narrative therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Smith & Nylund, 1997; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996).

Many of the pioneering cultural studies projects were conducted in England by researchers at the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. There, a variety of critical methods for the analysis and criticism of cultural practices and texts were developed (Hall & Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979). Through studies of youth subcultures, British researchers demonstrated how culture comes to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership. The British group of cultural studies, led by Stuart Hall, has had a profound international impact on the humanities and social sciences. Hall and his colleagues were some of the first academic researchers to study popular culture and take it seriously.

One of the key ideas generated from British cultural studies involves the manner in which subcultural groups and individuals can resist hegemonic forms of culture, creating their own oppositional identities and styles. This resistance is particularly significant given the strength with which media messages tend to reinforce complicity with dominant values and discourses. For instance, one of the most influential texts on subcultures, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, by Dick Hebdige (1979) read punk youth subcultures in terms of their challenge of hegemony through style rather than overt ideological articulations.

Previous approaches to culture tended to be primarily textual and elitist, dismissing media culture as banal and not worthy of critical attention. The project of cultural studies by contrast, avoids cutting the field of culture into high and low, or popular against elite. As a clinician, I am interested in youth subculture (music, video games, fashion, books, the internet, iPods, television, and films, for example) and its role in shaping young persons' identities and social practices. Hebdige's (1979) ideas, in particular, have enabled me to identify and privilege youth subcultures that often enable young persons to navigate and resist oppressive social practices (racism, sexism, heterosexism, and adultism, for example) and create their own preferred stories, identities, and meanings.

Cultural studies view all media texts as open to multiple readings. Members of divergent genders, classes, ages, races, nations, sexualities, and political ideologies interpret texts differently. Through ethnographic methods, cultural studies can shed light on why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes contradictory ways (Kellner, 1995).

Further, this approach takes a skeptical view of traditional research on media that focus on the "effects" of the media texts. Cultural studies argues that most "effects" studies are deterministic and linear in their methodology, making no attempt to understand the meanings that real people make of the media (Gauntlett, 1998). This is not to imply that the impact of the mass media should not be considered. However, cultural studies scholars attempt to understand the meanings, perception, and influences of the media in its social and political context, rather

than through a narrow and individualistic focus on effects and behavior. The conventional effects model assumes that children (and other consumers of media) are cultural dopes who passively are seduced by the dominant ideologies of the media. Those who see children as passive victims tend to focus on a single media text (such as a video game or a particular song), which can readily be isolated for censorship, and whose representations are presumed to affect all kids in the same way. Hence, the conventional effects model tends to rely not only on monolithic interpretations of media texts, but also of the children they affect. The discourses informing this view tend to rely on nostalgic views of “childhood innocence.” Lastly, empirical “effects” studies sometimes embellish their findings to make their causal links appear more conclusive than they actually are (Gauntlett, 1998).

Cultural studies theorists suggest that audience members, including children, actively negotiate the meanings of popular culture (Kellner, 1995). In fact, many kids read against the grain of a media text and use it for their own purposes. For instance, I have worked with young men of color who have appropriated the violent images in video games to escape the rules of a disciplinary, racist culture by, for example, shooting police officers in the video game as way of expressing their anger at police brutality (see Nylund, 2004).

Cultural studies scholars are interested in studying the connections between various factors—for example, how a violent video game is represented visually and acoustically; how it is storied, gendered, and raced with historical specificity; how it is linked with other discourses, such as sexuality and class; and how it is read by different groups. From this complex and situated reading of popular culture, a more pluralistic account of media consumption is constructed, one that emphasizes tensions and contradictions, and one that generates “thick descriptions” of the specific texts and their meanings.

These same kinds of thick descriptions, imbued with individual meaning and situated contextually, can be invited through a therapy practice that makes space for clients’ relationships with popular culture and media. Having a genuine curiosity about young people’s use of popular culture for their own purposes has helped me establish good working alliances with many of my clients. Many young people in my practice are surprised that I am interested in youth media/popular culture as it has often been dismissed, pathologized, and/or marginalized by adults in their lives. Lastly, cultural studies’ focus on media representations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation has given me new tools to discuss the effects of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism on my clients’ lives.

A CULTURAL STUDIES-INFORMED THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

In this section, I discuss my work at a nonprofit counseling agency, with Steven, a 17-year-old youth living in foster care. Steven’s foster mother, June, referred

him to our agency because she was concerned about his “low self-esteem” and “depression” that she felt emanated from Steven’s traumatic past. Steven’s parents were both killed in a car accident when he was four years old. Steven felt loved by June. This was a different experience for Steven, who had been physically abused in other placements. Steven informed me that his main concern was not his past, but rather a sense of isolation from the effects of heterosexism and homophobia in the face of his emerging gay identity.

At the end of our first meeting, I complimented Steven on his courage to tell me about his concerns, and we agreed to meet again. Over the course of our work together, Steven and I explored resources and peer groups that he could access that would support his preferred identity as a gay man. When I asked him whom he might imagine being one of his antihomophobic allies, he surprisingly replied, “Harry Potter!” Steven had read all of the *Harry Potter* novels stating that he could really relate to Harry, a person who was mistreated by his adoptive family.

The Cultural Phenomena of *Harry Potter* Books

The *Harry Potter* series has captured the imagination of millions of children and I was familiar with the stories from sharing them with my nine-year-old son. Some have referred to the popularity of the Harry Potter books and movies as a cultural phenomenon—“Pottermania.” Pottermania is not without its controversy. For example, some Christian groups have expressed concern about Harry Potter’s participation in sorcery and fantasy. Other groups, including parents and educators, applaud series author J. K. Rowling because her books have inspired many children to read.

Personally, I discovered that there were some interesting themes in the Harry Potter stories that could be used in therapy, particularly with children with behavioral or anxiety issues. My son seemed to agree. Once, while at a theme park, Drake imagined himself as courageous as Harry. This insertion into the text allowed him to get over his fear of riding a rollercoaster. Perhaps, I thought, other young persons could be inspired by envisioning an imaginary Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore, or Hagrid (characters in the *Harry Potter* books who are allies of Harry), coaxing them on to overcome particular problems. Tilsen, Russell, and Michael (2005) documented work with a 10-year-old who compared his own struggle with Asperger’s disorder to Harry’s clashes with Voldemort, the evil villain in the Harry Potter series.

From a cultural studies perspective, the *Harry Potter* books and the cultural phenomenon of Pottermania can be viewed as a text that reinforces the cultural commercialization of childhood. While I appreciate many of the heroic themes in the books, as a cultural studies scholar I am suspect of Pottermania, as the books not only serve to reinforce the commodification of childhood, but also replicate social normative messages. For instance, cultural studies scholar Turner-Vorbeck (2003) writes:

The *Harry Potter* books feature images of nuclear families without the inclusion of representations of the divorced, step, single, gay or lesbian, or adoptive or foster families of our contemporary society. The books also reinforce cultural stereotypes of power and gender, consistently portraying women as secondary characters. In addition, there is little cultural diversity represented and, when, it is presented, it is in the form of tokenism and colonialism . . . What appears to be represented in the *Harry Potter* books, then, is an aggregation of quintessential, hegemonic, hierarchical middle-class social and cultural values. (p. 20)

Yet, cultural studies theory/theories suggest that media/popular cultural texts are polysemic, that is, open to multiple interpretations. Steven, as an active and creative producer of meaning, found something “queer” in *Harry Potter*. If one reads *Harry Potter* against the grain, one finds support for Steven’s reading. The *Harry Potter* books are in fact, very queer. The word “queer” is typically thought to mean “homosexual,” but it also has larger associations suggesting a non-normative, alternative identity (Warner, 2000). Before moving ahead to a “queer” analysis of *Harry Potter*, it is important to discuss the tenets of queer theory and their connection to a cultural studies approach to media culture.

The Intersection of Queer Theory and Cultural Studies

Queer theory is a range of critical practices that study the relations between sex, gender, and sexual desire (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 2000). Queer theory challenges the notion of fixed identities (e.g., that one is lesbian, and through this assigned identity there is an innate or essentialized “lesbian-ness” about the individual). This marks one of the primary tenets of queer theory: the interrogation and dismantling of the homo/heterosexual binary (see Sedgwick, 1990). Thus, the word “queer,” even when used in the form of a noun, always maintains an active component that is attempting to disturb the “norm.” Queerness is temporal, future-oriented, always in process, and avoidant to fixed positions.

Much of queer theory’s ideas share a similar theoretical trajectory with cultural studies. Queer theorists, inspired by the tradition in cultural studies of researching youth subcultures, have focused their inquiry on queer subcultures. This recent research has helped challenge the notion of the subculture as primarily a youth phenomenon by destabilizing the binary of adolescence and adult that structures so many inquiries into subcultures. For example, Halberstam (2005) has documented how many homosexuals refuse the heterosexual imperative of home, career, and family by prolonging the periods of life devoted to subcultural participation (for instance Halberstam documents lesbian punk and slam poetry communities that challenge fixed gender norms and capitalist cultural imperatives to get a “real” job).

In addition to sharing a focus on subcultures, queer theory, like cultural studies, is interested in issues of power, representation, popular culture, subjectivity, identities, and consumption. Queer theory draws on cultural studies methods to

explore the social constructions of gender and sex, and how gays, lesbians, and transgender persons are represented in the media. One key text that uses a queer cultural studies approach is *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* by Alexander Doty (1993). In this book, Doty uncovers queer meanings and queer pleasure within mainstream, heterosexual popular culture texts such as the *Laverne and Shirley* television show. According to Doty (1993), key questions in analyzing media texts from a queer cultural studies perspective include:

- How does the product reinforce or disrupt traditional dichotomies and/or associations among them (white/black, straight/gay, masculine/feminine, male/female, good/evil)?
- How does the product reinforce or disrupt the modern notion of “essentialist” (the idea that sexuality and gender is ahistorical and fixed in biology) gender or sexual identities?
- How does the product reinforce or disrupt heterosexuality or its presumptions about the continuities, congruencies, or stability of the relationships between sex, gender, and desire?
- Can this text be read against the grain to unearth hidden queer meanings and pleasures?
- How does the product represent the project of “Othering”—giving subjectivity (voice, primary position) to certain characters while marginalizing (silencing, stigmatizing, objectifying) other characters?

Queer theory, like cultural studies, is interested in challenging hegemony, in this case heterosexual dominance, by interrogating the fiction of compulsory heterosexuality and marking nonstraight spaces of cultural production and reception (Halberstam, 2005).

A “Queer” Reading of Harry Potter

Using a queer cultural studies perspective with the Harry Potter story helped Steven and me uncover many queer themes and messages that challenged the books’ more dominant, socially normative themes. Cultural studies scholar, Michael Bronski (2003), lends support to a “queer” reading of *Harry Potter*, not just in a strict homosexual sense, but in a wider sense of queer theory’s penchant for challenging norms. For instance, he notes that at the beginning of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is an orphan who is stuck in a house with his aunt Petunia, uncle Vernon Dursley, and cousin Dudley, all of whom treat him poorly and do not value him. In short, Harry is different and fated to live in the world of so-called “normal” people. Bronski goes on to write:

Now, Rowling has never stated or even implied that the Potter books are gay allegory, but her language and story details effortlessly themselves to such a queer reading. In

her first book, Mr. Dursley keeps noting that the wizards and witches dress in purple, violet, and green clothing—all colors associated with homosexuality. More tellingly, the language Rowling has the Dursleys use to discuss Harry's mother and her wizard husband, referring to "her crowd" and to "their kind," mirrors often used to invoke homosexuality. And once Harry discovers the nature of his difference, the Dursleys demand complete silence and total concealment. (p. 3)

Steven, like Harry, was orphaned and had felt different and "odd." Harry's heroism gave Steven imaginary permission to step more fully into alternative masculinity and "come out" as a gay man. So much of the basic Potter plot is identical to the traditional "coming out" story. In fact, Steven told me in one session, "I think Harry is sort of coming out in a way."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, he's an outcast in his own family. He is abused by the Dursleys because he is different . . . sort of like me," Steven reflected.

"Yeah I agree. Their cruelty seems very calculated. Do you think that Harry was queer-bashed by the Dursleys?"

"I guess so. I hadn't thought about it that way but you're right!"

"Yet, in spite of his abuse, what kept Harry going on?" I asked. I was interested in Steven's interpretation not only of Harry's struggle, but also of his resistance to the oppressive conditions he experienced. By explicating this counter plot, I hoped to create an opportunity to construct conversationally Steven's own acts of resistance to the subjugating forces of homophobia and heteronormativity

"I think Harry knew he was special in some way . . . and it took Hagrid (the trusty Keeper of the Keys at Harry's school, Hogwarts) to explain his true nature as a wizard," Steven stated.

"So Hagrid helped Harry come out?"

"Yes," Steven replied with an excited look on his face. It was clear that he was making connections between Harry Potter's coming out and his own journey.

"Who is your Hagrid?" I inquired.

"Clare, my best friend and her mother . . . she's like a sister to me, and her mom is also. So when I went over for my birthday, that's when I decided I would tell them both that I was gay. I called Clare and her mom upstairs to Clare's room and had them both sit down. I had written a speech so that I wouldn't stumble over my words and would sound more confident. That didn't work . . . I started to cry and choke on my words. When I started to cry, Clare, and her mom got up and gave me a huge hug. They were so accepting. I felt relieved that I had gotten a little bit of the pressure off of my shoulders . . . That I could now talk to some of them about it. I even found out that Clare's boyfriend is bisexual and her friend, Shannon, is a lesbian. I felt a lot less alone. I imagine that's how Harry felt when he went to Hogwarts and found out there were other kids who were different."

Critically engaging with the *Harry Potter* texts added a rich layer to our therapeutic conversations. I found myself reading the books to look for other unique

accounts of Harry's life that Steven could find solace in. Steven's use of Harry Potter is a great example of how young persons use popular culture texts creatively to fashion alternative versions of whom they might be. In this case, Steven found an ally in Harry that prompted his acceptance of his gay identity. Like Harry who found friends in Hagrid, Ron, and Hermione, Steven began to search for support in the community, eventually attending a local teen Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender support group and joining his high school's Gay-Straight Alliance.

A Queer Word of Caution: The Limits of Identitarian Politics

Another area of study for queer theorists is the relationship between sexual identity and regulation. Foucault, in his key work *The History of Sexuality* (1980; which provided much of the antecedents of queer theory), gives a historical account of how the medical term "homosexuality" entered into discourse in Europe during the late 1800s as a way of disciplining persons who engaged in nonnormative sexual practices. Over time, people who engaged in these alternative sexual practices began to use this medically constructed category to speak on their own behalf, giving the label, "homosexuality," a sense of materiality and realness. Steven, for example, found the identity category of gay (and the process of "coming out") to be personally empowering. However, according to Foucault, there are limitations to this so-called liberatory project. For example, declaring oneself to be out of the closet may be personally confirming, but it entails acknowledging the centrality of heterosexuality as well as reinforcing the marginality of those who are still in the closet.

According to Foucault, it is impossible to move entirely outside of heteronormativity (a term that describes the institutionalization of heterosexuality as the norm). Foucault refers to the limitations of sexuality identity and the coming out narrative—people's willingness to occupy medically constructed categories of identity—as a "reverse discourse." Foucault's work reminds us that certain sexual liberation discourses (including Steven's coming out) in particular, the "reverse discourse," reaffirms a binary and unequal opposition between homosexual and heterosexual. In summary, Foucault rejects the traditional formulations of gay and lesbian identity politics as essentially restraining, even though emancipation struggles may be strategically and historically necessary.

So how to reconcile the tension between queer theory's rejection of identity claims and Steven's embracing of the reverse discourse? Perhaps Judith Halberstam's (2005) ideas are useful here as she writes, "we may not want to reject all reverse discourses per se, but may instead want to limit the ways in which we invest in them (coming out, for example) as end points" (p. 53). Hence, Steven's coming out and embracing a homosexual identity may be a starting point rather than an ending point in his journey. Over the course of time Steven may become less invested in expert-produced categories and more interested in fluid, sexual vernaculars and the categories produced through local queer sexual subcultures.

I find queer theory's opposition to all identity claims to be an attractive option for sexual politics as it insists that antihomophobic activism can be engaged by anyone, regardless of sexual preference or orientation, and that particular identity markers are not necessary for political participation. Queer theory seeks to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism and insists that sexuality is not easily reducible or united through categorization. These ideas are particularly useful for me as a straight ally as I now consider myself as having an even more vital role to play in fighting heterosexual dominance due to the inclusiveness of queer theory and politics. Queer theory has enabled me to cross boundaries that cut across sexual identity differences and build coalitions with others in fighting heterosexual dominance. Some of the ways that queer theory/activism has inspired me to oppose heteronormativity include: (1) working with gay youth in therapy; (2) teaching people to critically analyze the heterosexist messages in the media; and (3) using queer theory as a methodical tool in my academic writing/research to de-center heterosexuality.

MEDIA TEXTS AS USEFUL CLINICAL TOOLS

The mass media plays an increasingly significant role in defining the cultural experiences of contemporary childhood and adolescence. Nowadays, popular culture often serves as a primary vehicle for ongoing debates about youth. Many of the discussions about the role of the media and its relationship to young people have been sharply polarized. On the one hand, there are those who argue that childhood is dying and the media is to blame. From this perspective, the media is seen as commercializing kids and taking away the innocence of childhood and undermining the authority of adults. Typically this perspective is framed around simplistic moral panics about the influence of sex and violence in the media. On the other hand, there is exaggerated optimism about the new technologies suggesting that youth use the media for subversion and autonomous creativity. It is my experience that therapists tend to fall into either one of these polar camps.

Cultural studies offer a middle ground, an impasse from the above polarities. From a cultural studies perspective, children are not passive victims of commercial manipulation nor are they completely free and creative consumers using media culture for their own empowerment. Steven is proof he is not exploited by Pottermania; rather, he has actively inserted himself into the text to challenge traditional masculinity and "come out" as part of his journey in contesting heteronormativity. As I suggest in this article, cultural studies and queer theory are interested in the primary role media texts play in the shaping of sexual and gender identity. Using a queer cultural studies perspective, Steven and I read *Harry Potter* against the grain, "queering" the text, to help him construct his preferred sexual identity. Yet, in spite of the empowerment Steven experienced through *Harry Potter*, it did not lift him out of the material conditions he was living in. Furthermore, he lacks awareness of

the potential harmful effects of the increasingly crass commercialization of youth culture and Western culture's hegemonic, corporate-controlled media system. As conceptual partners, cultural studies and queer theory allow us to hold both positive and negative views of popular culture, thus helping us to realize that all of us, like Steven, are intertwined with consumer media culture. Since popular culture is omnipresent, we cannot escape it. Why not use popular culture for critical and therapeutic purposes? Media texts serve as useful clinical tools for unmasking problems as well as constructing new therapeutic possibilities. In particular, popular culture texts lend themselves well to the literary metaphor so central to narrative therapy. So are you ready to watch an episode of *Sponge Bob, Square Pants*, play a video game, or read the latest *Harry Potter* novel with one of your clients?

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