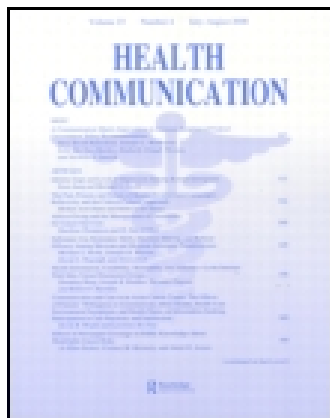


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“Dude! You mean you’ve never eaten a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?!?” Nut Allergy as Stigma in Comic Books

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This article examines the representation of nut allergy in comics aimed at children and young people. It maps the signification and stigma of nut allergy in comics, and includes an outline of the imagery, stereotypes, and connotations that are created on this condition. Three texts are examined: first, *Allergic*, a semi-autobiographical story by Adrian Tomine aimed at young adults; second, *What’s Up With Paulina?* from the Medikidz series of comic books that aim to help a pre-teenage audience learn about medical conditions; and third, *Peanut*, a forthcoming comic book by Ayun Halliday aimed at those in their early to mid teenage years. Using textual analysis, we focus on three principal areas of the texts. First, we consider the way in which the allergic character is represented in relation to examples of felt stigma, typified by feelings of shame and rejection, and compare this representation to common stereotypes of disability. Second, we look at the representation of other characters, drawing attention to the way in which stigma is enacted, highlighting acts of overt discrimination. Last, we examine the way in which the event of an allergic reaction is portrayed, considering how this might be used to help children and young people better understand nut allergy and combat the stigma attached to it. Throughout the article we compare the representation of stigma in comics with that depicted in empirical research on children living with nut allergies.

Comics are often viewed as an easy reading format aimed at children and particularly suitable for those with less developed literacy skills. On closer inspection, it is clear that they are, in fact, highly complex compositions that require well-developed literacy. Comics can place a great demand on cognitive skills, as readers are required to interpret not only text but also images (Chute, 2008). The combined textual and visual literacy skills required to understand comics can be seen as part of the combined literacies needed in a multimedia world (Lapp, Flood, & Fisher, 1999).

There are significant reasons why the study of the representation of nut allergy stigma is important for health communication. It is axiomatic that social and health stereotypes

impact on the success of health communication. Concepts of stigma are frequently intertwined with health stereotypes, and neither stereotypes nor stigma are easily separable from the manner in which health is made meaningful in society. Empirical research has shown that nut allergy sufferers and their families experience stigma because of the reactions of others to the condition (Pitchforth et al., 2011). In addition, nut allergy is often described in ways that imply that it is a social disability, such that suffering and risk could be mitigated by wider social consideration of the condition (Pitchforth et al., 2011).

Content analysis approaches have highlighted similar issues. Barnes’s (1992) study of the portrayal of disabled people in the media identified 12 commonly recurring stereotypes. These include the portrayal of conditions frequently associated with stigma, including multiple sclerosis, schizophrenia, paralysis, and epilepsy. Our analysis shows

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that many of the same stereotypes can be found with regard to nut allergy. In the comics discussed, 9 of the 12 stereotypes were seen in relation to the portrayal of characters with nut allergy, including depictions of the affected person as “pitiable and pathetic,” “an object of violence,” “an object of ridicule,” “their own worst enemy,” and a “burden” (Barnes, 1992, p. 3). With discussions of disability and stigma in mind, we study how the representation of nut allergy in comic books can contribute to, change, or overcome the stigma and stereotypes associated with nut allergy. Such a contribution adds to the knowledge available to those involved in communicating on this issue. The article examines the representation of nut allergy in three comics and outlines the semiotic and rhetorical techniques that are used to produce stigma. We examine the ways in which nut allergy is represented in comics, the potential for readings of comics to encourage, or discourage, the stigmatization of nut allergy sufferers, and the socially debilitating aspects of the condition. Before that, however, we offer some background on stigma and nut allergy, a description of how comics convey serious meanings, and a description of the method employed.

EXPERIENCES OF STIGMA AND NUT ALLERGY

Stigma, the concept from Goffman’s (1963) discussion of the social treatment of illness, disability, and otherness, is a process that devalues. Goffman explains how, through stigma, the individual is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Stigma is always a relationship between self and other where stereotype is produced; as Goffman (1963) explains, it “is really a special type of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (p. 4). Being unequal relations that always see the person partially through the attribute, stigmatizations are of central relevance to scholars and practitioners of health communication because they can be created, reinforced, or overturned through mass media forms.

Stigma is often divided into “enacted” and “felt” types (Scrambler & Hopkins, 1986). Enacted stigma is social behavior and includes experiences of rejection, exclusion, and prejudice, whereas felt stigma is the internalization of feelings that develop from being, or expecting to be, stigmatized, such as shame or fear of exclusion. There is evidence that alongside nut allergy being a serious condition, experiences of stigma make it even more troubling and construct it as a social disability. Venter et al. (2010) suggest that peanut allergy currently affects 1–2% of children, and the figure is increasing. In the majority of cases, the condition does not mitigate with age. Despite its seriousness, there is little social scientific research into the experiences of nut allergy. The Pitchforth et al. (2011) study interviewed children with a nut allergy and their parents. Both children and their parents reported experiencing stigma. Parents reported both felt and enacted stigma when trying to protect their

child from exposure to potentially threatening allergic reactions. Children themselves spoke of feeling excluded during school lunchtimes and when treats were given out at school, and of having to take action to mark themselves out from others in order to avoid nuts. This resulted in enacted stigma, including teasing and taunting. Monks et al. (2010) examined the practical challenges teenagers face in managing their allergy. It is noteworthy that half the 18 respondents to the questionnaire identified classmates as the group most in need of education and information about nut allergy. Stigma was a problem; some had experienced teasing and many felt that other pupils did not appreciate the seriousness of food allergy. In the comics under analysis in this article, we examine how both felt and enacted stigma are represented, reinforced, or undermined, thus highlighting some examples of how nut allergy stigma is mediated.

THE USE OF COMICS TO CONVEY SERIOUS MEANINGS

The representation of medical practice or conditions in comics is not as new as one might expect. In the past, comics have been used to illustrate a history of medicine to mass audiences, with the precedent existing in the form of American comic books of the 1940s. This “formula literature” (Hansen, 1994, p. 161) reached a mass audience, although it did not survive the 1940s due to the rise of television in the postwar period (Beatty, 2011) and a moral backlash against comics that blamed them for “delinquency” and “social decay” (Brown, 1997).

Studies have evaluated the effectiveness of comic books in educating both children and adults on health issues, including how comics have represented back pain, HIV, condom use, diet, pesticides, and cancer (e.g., Harvey, 1997; Kovacs et al., 2011; Milleliri, Krentel & Rey, 1999). There is research evidence that shows how fiction (which includes comics) can be an important method for conveying information on health issues. For instance, McNicol’s (2006) study of the censorship of reading material for teenagers focused on books on health-related issues. Using focus groups with young people, it discussed the differing reception of fiction and nonfiction books. Teenagers described how nonfiction books on issues such as sex and drugs were useful as basic information, but fiction was equally important because it helped them to understand the motives for and meanings of behavior. Understanding motivation was important for learning about such issues. Through fiction, children understood the longer term effects of certain actions. Fiction encouraged, in a way that nonfictional information could not, empathy for characters and learning about the potential effects of actions on health. This had greater impact than nonfiction sources of information. It is with this in mind that we examine the importance of comics for health communication.

The wider educative potential of comics has been acknowledged. Gerde and Foster (2007) argue that comics can “communicate, discuss, and critique issues” (p. 245), and thus form an effective educative tool in certain contexts. Comics are an intelligent and outward-looking medium that can be used at many levels of education to highlight social issues. Comic books, they say, “reflect the culture, but they also inform, as many comic books provide information and expect their readers to stay current in world events and social issues” (p. 245), thus offering a critical and complex media form.

That said, comics, like any text, are open to a variety of readings, and studies of readers’ responses to picture books may help illuminate the potential readings of comics. Kiefer’s (1985) study of young children’s responses to picture books developed a typology with four forms of reading. These are: (a) informative (content, comparisons with other books), (b) heuristic (problem-solving inferences), (c) imaginative, and (d) personal (feelings, opinions, relating to characters). We can speculate how these categories could be applied to the reading of comics about nut allergy. For example, readers could gain medical information about the condition; consider how the allergy could be managed; speculate on alternative outcomes had the characters acted differently; and reflect on how they may have reacted in the situation. Comics are not only a form of information provision, but they also demand an imaginative and empathetic response, which is a key mechanism for the generation of meaning.

A SEMIOTIC AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF COMICS

There are a number of methodological tools from semiotic or rhetorical analysis that can analyse the depiction of nut allergy in comics. For example, Groensteen (2007) argues that comics should be “considered . . . as a language . . . as an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning” (p. 2).

Rhetorical analysis shows how language can convince, or how it serves to generate meaning for readers. There are distinct rhetorical dimensions to comics that should be acknowledged. Gerde and Foster (2007) argue that “comic books appeal to people’s feelings beyond the rational” (p. 247). Nonrational or nonliteral meanings are very useful for conveying meaning (Weaver, 2011). As Gerde and Foster (2007) argue, comics provide “alternative universes in which alternative consequences can be explored” (p. 254). A common method of rhetorical analysis is one that seeks to map the “rhetorical triangle.” This involves a tripartite examination of the interaction, meaning construction, and generation of emotional responses between the arguer, the argument, and the audience (Aristotle, 1984; Richardson, 2006; Weaver, 2011). In relation to comics, this involves a

consideration of the position of the producer of the comic and the cartoonist, the content of the comic and its meanings, and the reception of the comic by various audience groups. As a part of the consideration of content or argument, there are tropes, such as metonym and metaphor, that produce rhetorical effects and create meaning within comics.

The rhetorical triangle involves a consideration of the reader of any text, and comics are no different. The comic reader has been described by McCloud (1994) as the author’s “silent accomplice” and “equal partner in crime” (p. 68). This demonstrates Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory of reading, in which a literary work is conceived not as an object, but as an experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text. This guidance takes the form of “clues” (Allen, 1998, p. 33) or reading instructions (Iser, 1989). Thus, comics require a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation, which fosters a form of interpretive intimacy (McCloud, 1994). The principles of rhetorical analysis and semiotics outlined are essential for an analysis of comics. There are also some specific characteristics of comics that need to be considered in more detail, namely, the interaction of text and image, and the development of contrasts and gaps in comics. We also explain how we selected the comics under study.

Text and Image in Comic Books

One of the clearest differences between the semiotic analysis of comics and that of dialogue or text is the role of image in the medium, in addition to that of text. Beaty (2011) describes how “comics operate on a system of co-presence, where images exist within the space of the page or double-page spread simultaneously” (p. 108). Beaty (2011) explains how the comic book “is structured around very different sets of operations. For instance, the co-presence of images allows the reader to assess the space of a scene relationally in a way that is not possible on film” (p. 108). The use of both text and image offers a “combination of linguistic and visual codes” (Groensteen, 2007, p. 3), which is described as creating more than the sum of its parts. The analysis of comics has to address image and text, and preferably as one.

Rosenblatt (1994) proposes that a “literary work exists in a live circuit set up between reader and text” (p. 25). In reading a comic, however, the situation is more complex as there are three components: reader, written text, and visual language. Each person not only has his or her own reaction to a word based on personal experience and background (Iser, 1989), but also his or her own individual reaction to each icon in a picture. The reader creates an overall meaning by relating both the words and images to his or her own experiences. Furthermore, in order to read comics, readers also have to understand particular conventions such as streaking effects to indicate motion and balloons to indicate speech. Regular readers of comics naturally become more skilled in interpretation with practice. Eisner (1985) refers to the

“series of repetitive images and symbols” (p. 8) that comics employ. When these are used repeatedly to convey similar ideas, “they become a language” (p. 8), and thus also a rhetoric.

The multimodality of comics and the primacy afforded to text or pictures has been much debated. We align ourselves with Miller (2001), who argues that privileging linguistic signs over pictorial signs disregards their shared function and mutual importance in the process of reading comics. Rather than “diverting attention away from the essential, namely the text itself” (Lefevre, 2010, p. 42), pictures work with the text. This does not necessarily mean that text and pictures convey the same message. For example, the picture might show the character’s outward behavior, while a thought bubble conveys his true feelings. This type of parallel narrative may be useful in representing the complex emotions and reactions associated with stigma. Furthermore, even if art and text appear to be telling the same story, they do not necessarily present events at the same time, in the same order, or from the same viewpoint. Lewis (2010) describes this as narrative polyphony. The process of deciphering the multiple messages that may be conveyed is, therefore, less straightforward than it might first appear: “Images and text arrive together, work together and should be read together. There’s no one rule, but in some combination you read words and pictures in tandem and in cross reference, one informing the other” (Gravett, 2005, p. 11).

Usually, a distinction can be made between pictures that act as “‘received information’ in contrast to words which have meanings which need to be ‘perceived’” (McCloud, 1994, p. 49). A dialectic is thus presented between pictures, which are open and easily understood, and words, which are abstract codes. Yet in comics, the worlds of words and pictures are brought together, as McCloud argues; when words become bolder and more direct, they are “received faster, more like pictures” (p. 49). Likewise, pictures can appear as abstract and symbolic as words. This complexity and degree of conflict between words and images perhaps make comics a suitable form to discuss the subject of nut allergy. For people with a nut allergy, there are many instances where appearances and reality do not correlate; for example, the allergy is not immediately visible to others, so the person appears “normal,” and his or her vulnerability is not realized. In this sense, nut allergy can be seen as an invisible disability; it is “life limiting but not readily discernable to others” (Davis, 2005, p. 153). Such conditions are shown to provoke stigma for individuals, which is coupled with the “discomfort of subjecting themselves to strangers’ interrogations” (p. 155). Davis explains how there is always a normative dimension to responses to invisible disability.

In general, it can be asserted that pictorial icons are more fluid in meaning than words; they have less of a “fixed vocabulary” (Bamford, 2003). Medley (2010) argues that distillation and exaggeration, realized through caricature,

can communicate more powerfully than “the real thing” (p. 54). These are important rhetorical devices. By removing realistic detail, other aspects of characters can be emphasized or imposed, which, in turn, accentuate connections or relationships that are less apparent in more literal or realistic images.

Comics, Contrasts, and Gaps

Other rhetorical dimensions of comics are the important contrasts that can be created, or the ways that images can “rhyme” with each other (Groensteen, 2007, p. 7). Images can set up a complementary, or an oppositional, presence that encourages rhetorical flourishes or breaks. Further rhetorical breaks are created because “comics is a genre founded on reticence . . . far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, [they] offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning” (Groensteen, 2007, p. 10). Crucially, comics omit far more visual information than they include, and the panels can be seen as “visual fragments” (Groensteen, 2007, p. 10). Hansen (2004) explains how this is built into the form of the text:

A story of sixty panels can have as many as fifty-nine gaps in the narrative—but those gaps, representing the action that happens “in the gutter” between frames, actually make comics particularly engaging because they force a reader to participate in imagining the story. (p. 155)

Key to the analysis of comics is Iser’s notion of “gaps” in the text, an absence of connections that readers must fill in order to make sense of the text. According to Iser (1989), “The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves” (p. 169). In comics, these “gaps” take the striking form of gutters between frames. It is the “incompleteness” and “indeterminacy” of comics that “urges readers to take up the constitutive act of interpretation” (Hatfield, 2005, p. xiii). McCloud (1994) describes this process of gap filling as closure, “the phenomenon of observing the parts, but perceiving the whole” (p. 65). In this process “the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” (p. 65). The “gaps” in text can be crucial for the representation of stigma, as what is not said or done is often as important as what is.

The Selection of Comics

The article aim is to analyze comic books or graphic novels aimed at children and young adults. We identified suitable publications using the databases of the British Library and the Library of Congress catalogues. This produced limited results because published comics commonly feature many stories inside of a larger volume and so are not always individually indexed. Similarly, the Grand Comics Database (Grand Comics Database Team, 2011) proved inadequate because it does not have a keyword search

facility. Healthybooks (Schlenter, 2012), a website listing books about medical conditions and social issues for children, was also searched and provided just one comic book relating to allergies—*What's Up With Paulina?* Following these efforts we carried out Internet searches using a variety of terms, including combinations of “nut allergy,” “food allergy,” “comics,” and “graphic novel.” From a number of titles identified, we selected those that would allow us to compare approaches in two genres. We have therefore selected two semi-autobiographical comics and one educational comic in which the person with a nut allergy was the central character and the allergy, and reactions to it, formed the narrative focus. Other sources did not have the allergic character as central and so would not have provided a comparison of comics that offer a similar treatment of nut allergy. The use of comics from different genres allows for narrative and information to be evaluated and contrasted between the cases, with the aim of highlighting the use of each comic for use in health communication. Comics that contain representations of nut allergy are limited in number and difficult to find. For these reasons the sample should be seen as nonrepresentative and certainly not exhaustive.

EXAMPLE 1—ALLERGIC

Allergic is a short story written and drawn by Adrian Tomine that was first published in the *Optic Nerve* mini-comic in 1993. Like many of his early stories aimed at a young adult audience, it is semi-autobiographical and focuses on his experiences as a child with a nut allergy. Fans are likely to be familiar with the main character from previous stories and able to relate to his reactions to the everyday situations presented. Tomine is a likeable character, and one who acknowledges his own shortcomings. He encourages a “personal” relationship to develop between author and reader by addressing the reader directly, via both speech bubbles and narrative boxes.

Although the focus of the comic is the social and emotional aspects of the condition, rather than the medical detail, the story starts with Tomine giving a medical explanation of nut allergy. The reader then follows him chronologically from the discovery of his allergy through to the present, and finishes with a glimpse into an imagined future where Tomine asks for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on receiving the news that he has just five minutes to live.

It is interesting to compare Tomine’s description of diagnosis with those of children included in the recent Pitchforth et al. (2011) study of nut allergy. Like many children in the study, Tomine describes the apparently innocent activity of eating a new food that resulted in an allergic reaction. In the text, he describes how his lips swelled and he started to vomit. Reinforcing this, the picture suggests that he was

struggling for breath and appeared dazed. Here, and at other points in the story when he experiences a reaction, the straight outline of the frame becomes a wobbly line, indicating the change from a stable situation to one where he lacks control of his body. The exaggerated drawing of his swollen lips and dazed eyes provide a contrast to the previous more realistic figures in the comic.

As the story progresses, and Tomine moves through childhood and adolescence, his attitude toward his allergy matures. As this happens, Tomine’s character can be seen as representing 6 of Barnes’s (1992) 12 media representations of disabled people and also clear elements of stigma. At the start, he is a pitiable, anxious child who experiences episodes of violence and curiosity from others. He develops to become a paranoid teenager who is, perhaps, his own worst enemy, and “sure everyone was out to get me” (Tomine, 1993, p. 65). His expression during these frames is frequently morose and apprehensive, as he sees himself as a burden to his parents and unable to participate in normal life. By the end of the story, however, Tomine has moved beyond these stereotypes by realizing that if he controls his fear, he can enjoy life despite his allergy. So while Tomine appears a weak, pathetic character for much of the story, by the time of writing he is clearly able to not only joke about his condition, but also make fun of his earlier neuroses. The reader is encouraged to join Tomine in joking about the self-indulgent approach to his allergy when he was younger, perhaps comparing it to the reader’s own immature behaviors. In this way, Tomine succeeds in securing empathy from the reader, and thereby understanding of his condition. This can be seen as a battle against stigma, as the fear of the violence of enacted stigma and the psychological burden of felt stigma are negotiated.

The reactions of others to Tomine’s condition are a central feature of the comic. These range from the comic incredulity of his teenage peers, “Dude! You mean you’ve never eaten a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?!” (Tomine, 1993, p. 64), to the matter-of-fact but unsympathetic approach of doctors he encounters, and the taunts of his classmates as a younger child. This last event is interesting in relation to stigma. As Tomine admits, at this point, he had entered his “paranoid phase” and he recollects being “surrounded by messy, careless kids who seemed to eat nothing but peanut butter” (p. 66). At the mention that he could die from eating peanuts, the pleasant, respectable children from the previous frame are transformed into a baying mob determined to “Kill Adrian!!!” (p. 67). Tomine extends the frame across the page to depict a comic chase scene. It is interesting that Tomine’s facial expressions when under attack closely resemble his expression at the time of experiencing an allergic reaction. Although the incident is presented in a humorous way, the reader can feel a degree of sympathy for Tomine. This uses the trope of exaggeration and suggests that other children did not simply fail to understand nut allergy and sympathize with his condition, but used it as a motive for bullying and enacted stigma.

Even those who have good intentions can fail to fully understand nut allergy and its potential for stigma, and real-life examples of this have been described (Pitchforth et al., 2011). Tomine relates how a teacher at his preschool made him a “special tuna sandwich” (Tomine, 1993, p. 65), cutting it with a knife that had been used to make peanut butter sandwiches. The small panels focusing on the sandwich and the knife, contrasting with the seemingly innocuous dialogue, signpost the mounting danger, which results in an allergic reaction “after only a few bites” (p. 65).

Interestingly, in Tomine’s story, he suggests that his parents were less concerned about the dangers faced than he was as a young teenager. In contrast to many parents of children with a nut allergy (Pitchforth et al., 2011), Tomine’s parents tried to encourage him to live as normal a life as possible, rather than acting as his protectors. This is an interesting variation on the type of felt stigma described by Pitchforth et al. (2011). Although Tomine understands that his parents were trying to make him happy, it is likely that their reaction increased feelings of isolation, as what he felt were serious issues and concerns were dismissed or ignored. In these frames, Tomine and his parents are drawn opposing each other, rather than side by side.

Despite its humorous approach, *Allergic* does, in fact, enable the reader to learn a great deal about nut allergy. At a basic level, it contains factual information about what an allergic reaction is and how it can be avoided and treated, but more importantly, it helps the reader to understand what it feels like to suffer from an allergy and to have an allergic reaction, and how other people’s reactions can be stigmatizing.

EXAMPLE 2—WHAT’S UP WITH PAULINA?

What’s Up With Paulina? is a comic from the Medikidz series created by Dr. Kate Hersov and Dr. Kim Chilman-Blair. The latter is the author of this issue with artwork by John Taddeo. It contains the largest amount of medical information of the three comics examined. The stated aim of the series “is to put medical information about disease and medicines into plain words for sick kids” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009). It seeks to present accessible and entertaining knowledge on medical conditions for children and young people, although the comic appears more suited to the pre-teenage audience. The series contains 19 titles to date, covering conditions that include depression, autism, and HIV. All titles are peer-reviewed.

This is a superhero comic. All of the stories are set on, or in, Mediland, which is a land that mirrors the human body, with the surface and parts of the body becoming the landscape, and the disease, illness, condition, or processes of the body becoming the evil and destructive characters that the superheroes encounter. In *What’s Up With Paulina?* the enemy is Anna Phylaxis, who is vanquished at the end of

the story by a giant adrenaline gun. The narrative begins as Paulina eats a cupcake that contains peanuts. She is then transported, along with the friend who gave her the cupcake, into Mediland. The two girls travel through Mediland with five superheroes, who explain the food allergy. There are a number of key themes that appear in readings of the comic.

The five superheroes that appear in the Medikidz comics help a child to understand and fight the condition highlighted in that issue. The individual characters are specialists: Chi focuses on the lungs, Skinderella on the skin and bones, Pump on the heart and vascular system, Axon on the brain, and Gastro on the stomach and intestines. Each of the characters embodies a superhero stereotype that gives powers that relate to their specialism. These are the key tropes used in the comic series. Female stereotypes are presented through the masked, mysterious, exotic, and possibly ethnic type, Chi, and the blond girl-next-door type, Skinderella. The male characters are equally stereotypical: Pump fills the herculean role while also reaffirming the not unproblematic stereotype of the strong black male, Axon represents a genius figure, and Gastro the overweight fool or joker. These characters construct some of the key oppositional elements of the comic, as contrast is created through the use of the stereotypes juxtaposed with one another; this, then, is one area of meaning creation.

The representation of the allergy sufferer is positive overall. The felt stigma of nut allergy is depicted in the attitude that Paulina exhibits at the beginning of the comic, as she explains her understanding of food allergy, “Don’t eat anything that tastes good! You may as well just send me home now” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009, p. 7), in a frame that shows Paulina with her arms crossed against a dark background that heightens the sense of social exclusion. This initial expression of exclusion is presented so that it can be redressed throughout the comic. She becomes empowered by the knowledge of food allergy received. She is also juxtaposed with Sofia, her friend, because Paulina is less frightened by what is happening in Mediland. This could serve as a positive representation for the food allergy sufferer reading the comic.

There are two parts to the depiction of the allergic reaction in the comic, which frame misunderstanding before medical knowledge is presented. First, the depiction of the allergic reaction before the children enter Mediland is chaotic, as the frames depict children reacting to “poison cupcakes” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009, p. 2). Once the children enter Mediland the depictions focus on the parts of the body affected and on the enemies that Paulina and the Medikidz face, namely, the B cell army and Anna Phylaxis. The Mediland landscape has an important effect on the reader. It forms a metaphorical shift, as the human body is used as a landscape, and this creates a safe distance between the corporeality of the allergic reaction and the allergic reader. This objectifies the condition and so allows space for its

normalization, promoting an educative function that may not encourage stigma.

There are a number of additional points in the comic that could undermine the positive element of the text in some readings. One of these themes is the treatment of medical knowledge, which is expressed first with an emphasis on the certainty of the knowledge of the superheroes. On the inside cover it says, “Not only do we know how Mediland works; we also know how the human body works!” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009). Later, Pump exclaims that “with our superpowers we can teach kids with *any* condition *everything* they need to know about the human body” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009, p. 5, original emphasis). Despite the initial display of medical certainty, the causes of nut allergy cannot be given such a treatment. The comic is peer-reviewed and aims to provide only accurate information. Later in the comic, as the superheroes and children are being chased by Anna Phylaxis, Paulina asks why B cells react to peanuts in the way that they do. Chi responds that “no one knows exactly *why* your immune system mistakes a specific antigen for an invader” (Chilman-Blair & Taddeo, 2009, p. 21). This creates a disparity between the expression of knowledge at the beginning of the comic, which is also a part of showing that the characters are superheroes, and the limitations of creating an accurate depiction of the condition and the knowledge that exists on it.

This disparity could be read in different ways by a young audience. First, the idea that medical knowledge, and doctors themselves, are all-knowing or undefeatable in the face of illness and disease could dominate through the expression of certainty and the superhero trope. This supports a dichotomy between “good” medics and “bad” diseases, with the former able to vanquish the latter. Second, young people may focus on the uncertainty, which could provoke anxiety in some readers. Third, there might be a tendency toward ambivalence through reading both elements (this may be the case in older children). This ambivalence could cause confusion or lead the reader to dismiss the comic and fall back on earlier understandings. If the aim of *MediKidz* is to reduce fear (Lister, 2009), then these readings may not do that for the more advanced reader.

Another connected issue is the explicit masculinization of medicine. This is evident in the characteristics of the superheroes. Both the strong and intelligent characters are male, and the female characters are fewer in number and perform an auxiliary role. Although all of the characters take turns to explain the allergy to Paulina and the reader, it is Pump who delivers the large bottle of antihistamine and Axon who fires the adrenaline gun. Gastro has a role by providing humor. The female characters principally provide information. The male superheroes are more often central to the frames. For example, Pump is central in 13 frames, followed by Axon and Gastro (7 each), Chi (4), and Skinderella (3). Although this may not aid the depiction of stigma, it does offer a reading that naturalizes medicine as a masculine activity. This

may not prevent an understanding of food allergy but it is problematic for other reasons.

EXAMPLE 3—*PEANUT*

Peanut is a comic book written by Ayun Halliday and illustrated by Paul Hoppe. It is scheduled to be published in 2012, so this analysis is based on the prepublication sample pages that are available. This is a story for young people in their early to mid teens. The main character, Sadie, is about to start her sophomore year (15 years old) at a new school, and to make herself appear more interesting, she pretends to have a peanut allergy (Halliday, in press).

This is an intriguing storyline when considered alongside research on children with a nut allergy and their families. Pitchforth et al. (2011) refer to the “socially ambivalent status of nut allergy as a diagnosis,” and how, as a result, nut allergy is often seen as “a frivolous and self-indulgent fad invented and maintained by neurotic, attention-seeking people” (Pitchforth et al., 2011, p. 10). In *Peanut*, the nut allergy is a fictional condition conceived as a call for attention, although in this case it is invented by the child, not her parents. It is difficult to comment fully on this story as it is not yet published. The available extracts suggest that, rather than belittling the implications of nut allergy, this approach does offer an alternative way of highlighting the potentially serious consequences of the condition.

The opening page of the comic book consists of six frames and a narrative by the main character. The first five frames set the scene, showing snapshots of the move to a new home and new school. This is a cinematic approach as a narrator introduces the story while the scene is set visually. In contrast to the pictures, which provide a backdrop, the text comes straight to the point as peanut allergy is mentioned in the first frame. At this point, the reader assumes the peanut allergy is a real condition. The final frame on this page is the first in which Sadie is seen and only the bottom portion of her face is shown at this point. The slightly sinister phrase in this final panel, “I knew I had to spell it out” (Halliday, forthcoming), is the first point at which the reader has a sense that all may not be straightforward and suggests that something unpleasant will unfold.

The second preview page consists of a single picture rather than a series of frames, with three small frames embedded in the main scene. It shows the entrance to a school, with children approaching at the start of the school day. The text is clustered around the three embedded frames. The first, at the top left of the page, focuses in on a girl’s mouth blowing a bubble-gum bubble. The text is not in a speech bubble, but is assumed to be the girl’s words. She confirms that peanut butter is “innocuous” (Halliday, forthcoming) to most people. The second inserted frame is located at the bottom in the centre of the page. The same character is speaking and the text at the top of the frame

explains that, to her, peanut butter is “a killer—one taste and BANG. At this point, the reader looks down to the frame where the bubble-gum bubble has popped. At the bottom of this frame are the direct and sobering words: “I’m dead.” The final frame on the far right of the page is circular and features another character, Zoo, emphasizing the dangers of nut products for someone with an allergy: “just the teeniest, baby-fingernail-sized spoonful.” Again, the mood is ominous.

The third prepublication page starts with another narrative from the main character highlighting the differences in attitudes toward nut allergy and pointing out that not everyone is as perceptive about the implications as Zoo. The first frame shows a scene with two girls disparaging Sadie’s nut allergy, telling her to “stop acting like you’ve got cancer” (Halliday, forthcoming). From the language and pictures used, they appear loud, aggressive, and ignorant, thus clearly enacting stigma toward Sadie. The following frame shows the girls walking off while Sadie watches, looking miserable. The text is low key: “Nice, huh?,” summing up her feelings of isolation and rejection—or felt stigma. Below this are two similar pictures of Sadie. This is the first time the reader has seen her full face. In the first, she appears shifty and the text reflects her discomfort with what she is saying: “Oh yeah, I almost forgot . . .” The dramatic revelation, “I’m not really allergic to peanuts,” follows in the final frame. This is the first time that Sadie’s words have appeared in a speech bubble. In previous frames, she has spoken as a slightly detached narrator, but at this point, she addresses the reader directly, emphasizing the significance of this statement. Although in the previous frame she looked to the side, now she looks directly at the reader, indicating that what she is saying is true. It is interesting that, although admitting she has been lying, she appears vulnerable and open.

Both the text and pictures of the pages of this comic are understated, especially when Sadie is speaking. Caricatures and exaggeration are seen when the two students scorn her condition, and the words and drawings are used together to suggest to the reader that they are not being told the truth and a bombshell is about to be dropped. This may strengthen the stigmatization of nut allergy as an invented and unreal condition, although it also creates ambivalence as Sadie experiences both felt and enacted stigma, which encourages sympathy.

CONCLUSION

The article maps the representation of stigma in three comics to explain the imagery, stereotypes, and forms of stigma that are developed in each, and to show how these representations are similar and different to the ways in which the stigmatization of nut allergy has been recorded in empirical research. The discourses of stigma in the comics are linked and contrasted with those in other social settings. Although the three comics share common features of the format, they are from

two genres, and thus offer different approaches to the depiction of nut allergy and stigma. We argue that *What’s Up With Paulina?* contains a number of issues of sociological interest and that are potentially problematic, but that in relation to stigma the images are positive. Stigma is used at the outset and is reshaped in the comic book, which, coupled with the provision of medical information, could be empowering for the young reader. It is difficult to see how stigma is encouraged in this example and this could be a useful educational resource.

The other two comics, *Allergic* and *Peanut*, have more developed narratives and stronger characterization, making them more compelling as literary works. A key strength of this type of comic is the opportunity for more subtle and complex discussions and depictions of stigma, which are not possible in the peer-reviewed medical comic. Felt stigma is represented in *Allergic* through the depiction of psychological stages, and enacted stigma through the aggressive reactions of peers. This could provoke sympathy from the reader and has the potential to develop understanding and empathy. *Peanut* has a more obvious ambiguous potential. It represents the condition of nut allergy as unreal and so could suggest that stereotyping of it is not in fact stereotyping but a justified response to a fictional condition. Perhaps more so, it offers the potential for understanding of stigma by showing some of the stigmatized reactions in this emotive, literary form.

Although the author may, to some extent, guide the reader’s reactions to the felt and enacted stigma depicted, comics are a complex medium and require well-developed literacy skills to be comprehended fully. There will always be differing responses to them. Comics require an interaction between the author and reader, and it is this interaction and its unpredictable elements that present “risks” for audience members in relation to reproducing stigma and stereotypes. It is important to identify stigma in any medium, yet the rhetoric of comics can be unstable and might support negative stereotypes or narratives in certain conditions. It is this dichotomy that we have unpacked in the article in relation to the three examples.

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