doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/98736

On Superherology

Kyle Hammonds, University of Oklahoma

Abstract

In 2012, Travis Langley's book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* introduced the term "superherologist," indicating Langley's belief that scholars who study superheroes belong to a unique field of study. This presentation seeks to explore historical academic standards for the constitution of disciplines, fields, and topics, and hold them against Langley's claim that superhero studies warrant their own field. Further, if "superherology" does indeed qualify as an academic field (versus a mere topic, subject, etc.), what are the boundaries of the field and how should researchers engage in appropriate scholarship for the subject matter? The legitimacy of superhero studies in academia is bound up in whether superherologists fit the historical boundaries of rigorous scholarship.

Further, this presentation does not solely seek theoretical ground for determining whether superhero studies belongs in scholarship; a praxical approach to superhero studies is suggested through a discussion of the questions: 1) Who can be a superherologist? and 2) What are the practical aims and scope of superherology? Ultimately, the presentation will conclude that superhero fans all have the opportunity to engage in superherological work.

Introduction

Academic research to understand the social functions of superhero myths has only recently begun to gain traction. The mass production of formal superherological stories through television and film seem to have alerted some scholars to the fact that superhero myths are legitimate subjects of study. Lack of research on superheroes is undoubtedly due to the significant American stigma against superhero narratives. Lopes (2006) argued that comic books, the source material from which most contemporary superhero stories are extrapolated, "have been stigmatized since their introduction in the mid-1930s, and this stigma has affected comic books as well as artists, readers, and fans of comics" (p. 388). Given the lack of superherological research, relative to other existing topics and fields, present scholars would do well to add "academics" to Lopes' list of groups impacted by superhero stigma. Although Lopes' sociological analysis of comic book stigma in 2006 concluded that "the efforts of publishers, artists, and fans in comic book culture to break through the barriers to this medium seem to have finally born some fruit," the analysis itself bore out that much work has yet to be completed in studying comics because of the lingering effects of pre-existing comic book stigma (p. 411).

Accordingly, although superhero scholarship exists and continues to be conducted, most researchers who dare to

address superhero myths identify as academics in larger disciplinary areas, specializing in a different subject, who simply happen to have studied a superhero at some point. In other words, superhero research is not usually produced by people who claim such research as their primary academic interest. A line of inquiry inspired by this knowledge regarding the production of superhero scholarship includes whether superhero myths may warrant constitution of an academic discipline or whether existing scholarship is already most productive by examining superheroes as objects of study. This question is significant to superhero researchers because the academic categorization of their scholarship impacts *how* superhero stories are studied, including the scope of research and acceptable study methodologies.

In 2012, a superhero researcher – Travis Langley – at Henderson State University in Arkansas published a book publically indicating superhero research as his primary interest. Further, Langley introduced a term implying that there is something scientific (and, therefore, academically legitimate) about studying superheroes. In the "About the Author" section his book, *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*, Langley (2012) introduced himself as a "superherologist." Additional reading of Langley's biography in the book revealed that he had been using the title of superherologist for some time in both social media and for scholarly work (e.g., personal website with course syllabi, academic conference schedule, etc.). Despite use of the unique term, superherologist, though, Langley did not write any explanation of the word that he introduced. Perhaps he intended the term to function informally or believed the meaning of the word would be apparent in its construction. In either case, Langley's term and its variations have now entered the public arena and suggest that superhero research may be serious and significant in academic study. The following essay will explore the potential meaning and implications of being a superherologist, examine the academic boundaries of superhero studies, and call for future research in superherology.

Men and Masks: Who is Travis Langley?

Understanding Langley's academic work and introduction of the word, superherologist, may lend insight into how other scholars may navigate superhero research as well. Langley is presently situated in the department of psychology at Henderson State University (HSU.edu). His status is, notably, "professor of psychology" and not "professor of superherology." Even so, as with other instances of his public biographical information, Langley's entire blurb on his Henderson State webpage emphasizes his "authority on the psychology of superheroes and fictional television characters" with the discipline of psychology being mentioned almost as a backdrop (HSU.edu). Although there are undoubtedly commercial benefits for authors of best-selling books on superheroes to advertise themselves as a superherologist, Langley's focus on superhero stories as a primary research interest still rails against the American comics stigma and potential academic prejudices. Langley obviously

acknowledged the potential academic backlash of studying superheroes by claiming that "the professor side of my life and the nerd side were two separate things until I went to ComicCon in 2007… It was a place that celebrates interests that might ostracize people somewhere else. I felt happy, comfortable, and full of joy in this environment." (HSU.edu) The merging of Langley's two, previously separated, social identities of academic and geek – a transformation seemingly akin to the dual identity tropes of many superhero stories – culminated in the publication of *Batman and Psychology* in 2012. With *Batman and Psychology*, Langley took his self-appointed title of superherologist and advertised it to the world. Analyzing the phrasing of Langley's bio in the book highlights the negotiation of his academic identity at the time:

> Superherologist Travis Langley teaches on the psychology of crime, mental illness, social behavior, and media (including comic books), not to mention a course titled Batman, at Henderson State University. He received his bachelor's degree in psychology from Hendrix College and his psychology doctorate from Tulane University. An organizer of the Comics Arts Conference, he regularly speaks as a panelist discussing the psychology of superheroes at conventions such as San Diego Comic-Con International, WonderCon, and New York Comic Con. As part of their ongoing ERIICA Project (Empirical Research on the Interpretation and Influence of the Comic Arts), Dr. Langley and his students investigate how fans see themselves and their heroes. Travis has also been a child abuse investigator, courtroom expert, and undefeated champion on the Wheel of Fortune game show even though none of the puzzles they gave him were about psychology or superheroes. (2012, *About the Author*, emphasis in original)

Even though Langley's biography splits up writing space about psychology and superherology fairly evenly, the breakdown of individual accomplishments clearly favors superherological research. Again, while acknowledging that Langley's credibility as a superhero scholar may influence the success of his book[s], Langley's biography in the book is representative of the public self that he has presented for years. The focus on superherological work in Langley's *Batman and Psychology* biography is similar to what may be found in his Henderson State site biography as well. Both Langley's book biography and his HSU webpage present a researcher who does not merely tack superhero studies as a footnote onto their curriculum vitae or conveniently forget their superhero scholarship in certain contexts; to the contrary, Langley always identifies as *both* a professor of superherology and psychology.

Generally speaking, other scholars would not question what it means for Langley to be a professor of psychology. The discipline of psychology has a long-

standing history with recognizable theories, methods, and objects of study. Superherologists (if anyone besides Langley may take on the title) do not enjoy the same recognition, popular history, or clarity in methodology. Even so, Langley has consistently presented himself as much as a professor of superherology as psychology, implying a perception of similarity and, perhaps, equitability between the two areas of study. Based on Langley's negotiation of his [public] academic identity, scholars interested in superhero research may benefit from investigating whether superherology might be considered a field – a true, equitable counterpart to disciplines such as psychology.

Hero's Journey: From Subject to Field

If a type of research constitutes a discipline/field (the terms, consistent with most literature on the topic, will be used interchangeably to represent the same grouping of research criteria) then one could expect to see entire departments at universities eventually dedicated to that scholarship, degrees in that discipline being bestowed, etc. Does superherology meet all of the criteria of an academic discipline, as Langley's work seems to imply? Have academic communities simply not become far enough removed from comics stigma to acknowledge the disciplinary potential of superhero studies? These questions can only be answered with a thorough understanding of criteria that scholars have traditionally accepted for constitution of a discipline.

The field of communication studies has been selected as an exemplar for understanding constitution of academic disciplines. Communication studies is an appropriate exemplar for consideration on this topic for several reasons: 1) communication studies, like superherology, is a relatively young [formal] area of study compared to other disciplines, 2) communication scholars have, therefore, recently recorded their struggle with questions of academic identity for other scholars to read and consider, 3) communication studies is now generally recognized as a discipline, giving observers of its struggle for "disciplineship" a complete view of the process, 4) communication research emerged from interdisciplinary scholarship, much like present superhero studies, and 5) much superherological work emerges from communication scholarship based on a disciplinary interest in how comics, movies, television, etc. function as media. Based on an examination of communication studies' recent transformation from a subject to a discipline, researchers may be able to observe whether superherology mirrors any of the qualities that communication studies used in its own academic promotion.

As recently as 2005, Gronbeck wrote an article with a very telling title about the then-current state of communication studies: *Is Communication a Humanities Discipline? Struggles for Academic Identity*. In regard to understanding broad academic identity, Gronbeck (2005) explained,

> With the advent of the modern(ist) university came the effort to chisel out *disciplines* – congeries of definitional and methodological

> apparatuses dividing the social and human worlds into identifiable segments, each with axioms and theories, logics for inference, and vocabularies for study." (p.230, emphasis in original)

Gronbeck observed three recognizable traits of an academic discipline, each of which much be unique and "identifiable" as a part of the discipline: axioms and theories, logics, and vocabularies (p. 230). Later in the article, Gronbeck affirmed that communication studies should be considered a discipline because it "can be understood theoretically or paradigmatically in a fully panoply of perspectives" and that the field is clearly defined or "articulated in conceptions calling for either social-scientific (quantitative/qualitative) or humane (critical/cultural) perspectives" (p. 240). In sum, scholars in communication have uniquely recognizable descriptions of the world, understandings and beliefs regarding the operations of the world, and terminology to articulate these special descriptions and understandings. Among the other criteria that Gronbeck suggested regarding disciplinary status, the standard of recognizable methodologies was also implied.

Gronbeck's view of communication studies has been both complimented and complicated by other scholars. For example, Pearce (1985) argued that communication studies – as it is presently known – came about based on a logic "created in the dialogue of two schools of thought… rhetoric and speech" (p. 259). Pearce's observation is significant because he essentially claims, contrary to other conceptions, that a contemporary discipline can exist based on worldviews which "[preclude] the scientific use of scientific methods of research" (p. 258). For superhero studies, Pearce's argument means that scholarship does not necessarily need to strictly adhere to a particular set of scientific or social scientific methodologies in order to be considered a discipline – even though, as Pearce recognized, the gradual incorporation of such methodologies would not invalidate previous work in a content area. Pearce's conclusions about discipline being grounded in bodies of discourse lead him to make the argument that "the power of [the communication studies] discipline derives from its diversity and disorder. Disorder results from the simultaneous presence of incommensurate paradigms, each with a viable claim to be the legitimate form for the discipline" (p. 281). These competing worldviews, then, created a body of discourse in which scholars could find recognizable traditions of research while also seeing space for future innovation. Pearce accepted that communication studies, which he acknowledged as a discipline, was chaotically formed from multiple sources (or traditions) and yet found unity for the overlapping strands of tradition in the increasing disciplinary monographs, journals, and critiques (pp. 268 and 278). Pearce's point of view on academic discipline, then, suggests that a field can be known via a unique and recognizable body of discourse which can be manifested in monographs, journals, and/or critique. To Pearce, critique was especially important because it indicated that there was enough

substantial scholarship in a research area to warrant appraisal from other scholars (p. 278).

With the journey of communication scholarship in view, researchers may explore whether currently diasporic superherological students may tie together their chaotic research strands to form a cohesive discipline.

Secret Identity: Is Superherology a Discipline?

Like Gronbeck, present superhero researchers' first concern should be whether superherology is a humanities discipline identifiable through social scientific methodologies. Social scientific identity ought to be a primary concern because the name "superherology" (literally "the study of superheroes") uses a suffix (-logy) which is commonly associated with scientific – and social scientific – research. Therefore, Gronbeck's criteria for humanities fields will be used as an initial framework for determining the status of superherology in academia.

Gronbeck introduced three prongs of a standard for evaluating disciplinary status in the humanities: 1) axioms and theories, 2) logics, and 3) vocabulary. Every existing discipline features unique theories which have grown out of scholarship in the special discourse of the field. To return to the example of the communication studies discipline: scholars in the communication field have created scientific models for understanding how communication operates, social scientific theories explaining why people use communication in various ways, and rhetorical techniques for making sense of communicative phenomena.

Unfortunately, comics scholarship – particularly superherological research – has produced few distinctive theories (and perhaps, depending on the criteria being applied, no unique theories at all). Although superhero scholars frequently utilize theory in their work, the production of "superhero theory" is limited, if not non-existent. Virtually all comics scholarship that seems to produce theory is indeed simply developing ideas which are largely advancements based on pre-existing models or axioms from larger research areas. For example, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, McCloud (1993) wrote about how comics creators utilize knowledge regarding iconicity, color, identification, and more to engage their readers. However, an examination of these bodies of knowledge will quickly reveal that McCloud was (intentionally) drawing on pre-existing theories about art and perception from fields such as philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and communication studies. Rather than inventing new theory, McCloud was gathering relevant knowledge from other fields together in a single place for digestion and interpretation in the context of reading comics. In fact, McCloud wrote in the final chapter of *Understanding Comics* that comics artists and audiences utilize comics as a medium of communication which "is only effective when we understand the forms that communication can take" (p. 198). Understanding comics as a form is undoubtedly work that can already be rightfully placed in the hands of

communication scholars – although much more work could be done from within the communication discipline to develop thorough knowledge of comics. Likewise, studying comics content may belong to literature. Studying the social impacts of comics on audiences may belong to sociology. Ultimately, although McCloud introduced a useful vocabulary for discussing comics in his book, he did not develop original theories or logics toward a unique body of discourse.

The same could be said for other seminal works in comics scholarship. For instance, Groensteen's (1999/2007) *The System of Comics*, and his other related works, identified special ways that comics operate by relying on theory from areas such as narratology, rhetoric, and psychology. Similarly, Cohn's (2013/2014) *The Visual Language of Comics* does indeed reveal unique ways that comics operate as a medium, but does so by relying on theories from aesthetics, linguistics, and semiotics. The list could go on. Virtually every major theorist interested in studying comics reveals new knowledge about comics as a medium by relying on other disciplinary bodies of discourse. Further, none of the afore-mentioned works have been superhero-specific. In order for superherology – instead of comics studies in general – to constitute a discipline, superhero scholars must produce theories that are specific to superherology itself. As with comics, though, superhero studies have largely been situated in broader research areas.

For example, Lawrence and Jewett's (2002) *The Myth of the American Superhero* – the authoritative work on the historical development of America's superhero mythology – does not build theory, advance unique logics for superhero studies, or invent new vocabulary for understanding superheroes. Lawrence and Jewett's book is largely in the vein of American Studies, using cultural studies frameworks to understand the sociological trends and historical developments of superhero-oriented concepts.

Researchers investigating the history of superherological work will quickly find that most attempts at theory-building found within superhero discourse do not actually emerge from superherological literature. Conversely, such scholars will find that superherological literature has instead often been used to develop theories for broader disciplines. Langley (2012), himself, or White and Arp (2008), for instance, have utilized superheroes as exemplars for exploring content from within their own respective disciplines – psychology and philosophy. The use of superheroes to understand and develop other disciplinary areas suggests that superherology would be best categorized as a topic of study rather than a field. Put another way: scholars who examine if/how superhero stories express a message or persuade an audience are studying communication (not superheroes), those who study the content/composition of superhero stories are studying literature, those who study the ways that dual forms of visual language in superhero comics promote literacy are in the field of reading, and so on. Superherology, at least by Gronbeck's standards, should then be considered a *topic*, instead of a discipline,

particularly because the researchers who investigate superhero stories virtually always do so as an investigation in a larger academic area, in keeping with previously established theories, logics, and vocabularies.

Pearce (1985) also offered criteria for understanding academic discipline, which differed in some ways from the standards discussed by Gronbeck. Pearce's standards warrant exploration because they indicate that threads from across previously established disciplines might be extracted and interwoven to constitute a new discipline. Pearce's criteria, at first glance, seem to be more promising for the future of superherological research than Gronbeck's standards. Pearce's interdisciplinary approach to academic categorization may be better suited to understanding a diverse area of study, such as superherology, than the ambitiously rigid markers discussed by Gronbeck. Although Pearce's work was published earlier than Gronbeck's, the criteria from each author has been presented out of chronological order in this essay in order to prioritize the most concrete and recent standards for understanding academic identity in the flow of the discussion.

Researchers are unlikely to find support for superherology as a discipline using Pearce's standards either, though. Again, according to Pearce, academic disciplines might be known via recorded arguments regarding competing schools of thought in a particular area that result in ongoing discourse evidenced in the production of monographs, journals, and critiques. Although many academic journals exist which feature articles about superheroes, journals with purely superherological focus have yet to make any significant academic presence. Further, existing critiques regarding superhero stories are not evaluations of superherological theory, but consideration of art objects, communication media or phenomena, linguistics in superhero myths, etc. Ultimately, during the investigation conducted in the completion of this essay, no significant evidence was found to support that superherology may constitute an academic discipline. Instead, superherology would be best considered a topic – a research area linked by subject, content, and aims. Researchers can be sure of this conclusion for several main reasons: 1) there are no agreed upon theories or methods for superherological research, 2) superherology is always studied under the umbrella of larger disciplinary banners, and 3) there has been no significant attempt for superherological scholars to unify into a single academic group.

Saving the Day: What Do Superherologists *Do*...?

Superhero scholars should not necessarily be discouraged that superherology does not constitute a discipline; there is much, legitimate academic work in superherology to be completed from a topical standpoint. Even so, if superherology is not an academic discipline, then how – if at all – does it fit into university research and why have so many people recently attempted to study the subject? In a 1972 issue of *Diacritics*, Eco famously wrote that comic book heroes were new form of American literary hero –

contrasted with traditional figures and novelistic figures – because superheroes "must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable..." while yet being "subjected to a development which is typical… of novelistic characters" because of the desire for mass production and consumption of superherological stories (p. 15). The role of myth in the development of culture has been well established as a fertile and useful area of study. Eco rightly observed that superhero stories represented an adaptation in the American monomyth – the popular development of the Western hero. To advance Eco's point, comic book heroes, as Eco referred to them, did not remain confined to the page: they have evolved and been materialized as toys, film and television characters, gaming avatars, and much more. Superheroes are widely known and superherologic stories are thoroughly ingrained in Western popular culture. These stories are, in fact, so ingrained that many of them may well be immortal now. For instance, Brooker (2000/2005) argued that despite fluctuating popularity of comics or movies featuring the Batman character, Batman's story consistently remains in popular memory and always seems to eventually spawn again in another medium. To Brooker, even though "Batman could 'die' in the comic book, or fold as a comic book – just as he seems now to have failed as a movie franchise… by now, I think, his legend could not be killed" (p. 311). Interestingly, a new and extremely successful Batman movie franchise emerged with the release of *Batman Begins* (Franco, Roven, & Thomas, 2005) shortly after the second printing of Brooker's book – perhaps lending credence to Brooker's argument. The abiding nature of superhero figures in popular culture indicate several major research opportunities which extend from the existence of superherological myths. A few such opportunities will be mentioned in this essay; although, the list presented here should not be considered exhaustive.

Superheroes are often the subject of history and/or cultural studies. As previously mentioned, Lawrence and Jewett's (2002) *The Myth of the American Superhero* trace superherological stories, much in the vein of Eco's work, as reflective of developing American values over time. Similarly – although not a strictly academic work – *Supergods*, by comics scripter Grant Morrison (2012), probed historical promptings for the emergence of famous superhero figures. Morrison's thesis was that "we live in the stories we tell ourselves" and that "superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations" (p. xvii). In other words: Morrison examined how superhero narratives were inspired by various events and ideas from American history and, therefore, are reflections of that which created them. Brooker (2000/2005) also took a historical/cultural approach in *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, and his subsequent Batman works, by employing mixed qualitative and rhetorical methodologies in order to understand how the legend of Batman both shaped, and has been shaped by, American history. Batman, as many other popular heroes, then, is

representative of particular values, logics, etc. emerging from the historical moments that enabled his stories in popular culture. The historical elements and Western values mined from superhero myth are plentiful as well. Research in this area has spanned across multiple specialized areas of history and culture, from historical/narrative threads between superheroes and medieval culture (e.g., Tondro, 2011) to religious studies and the prominence of Christian tropes and archetypes in superherological narrative (e.g., Asay, 2012). The list of excellent books and articles excavating meaning from elements of history and culture embedded in superhero stories could go on and on; but the afore-mentioned works surely suffice to introduce an interesting and productive line of research for superhero scholars.

Although there are many other potential academic strands for superhero research, such as literary (e.g., Reynolds, 1992; Rosenberg and Coogan, 2013) or artistic/aesthetic approaches (see any number of existing academic journals focused solely on comics art, including articles on superhero imagery), the most frequently utilized line of research for superheroes is clearly pedagogy. Langley's own use of the term superherologist seemed emerge from his work on a psychology class at Henderson State simply titled "Batman" (2012, About the Author). Based on the biographical information provided in the book, Langley was teaching his Batman class before the publication of *Batman and Psychology*. Langley now incorporates *Batman and Psychology* into his Batman course (travislangley.info). Any investigation into the content of *Batman and Psychology* will immediately yield the conclusion that the text is pedagogical in purpose. In the book, Langley explained theories of psychology with examples from Batman literature and then presented case studies from Batman stories as problem-posing scenarios. The case studies are especially telling of Langley's pedagogical motives because they invite readers to examine scenarios utilizing the information about psychology that they had learned from previous readings in the book. Langley is far from the only author to utilize superheroes as case studies or problem-posing learning scenarios, though. The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series has published an edited volume on *Batman and Philosophy* (White and Arp, 2008). The book is essentially a collection of essays that use Batman examples in order to introduce concepts from the philosophy discipline. Many other superheroes have also been included in Philosophy and Pop Culture series. Additionally, a number of educational texts which are marketed as comics resources have a distinct focus on the superhero myths in comics. For instance, Dong's (2012) edited volume, *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*, included several essays which are superhero-specific and drew on theories and methods from a variety of fields such as American, ethnic, women's, cultural, and genre studies in addition to rhetoric. Rourke's (2010) *The Comic Book Curriculum: Using Comics to Enhance Learning and Life* showcases a superhero on the front cover and exclusively utilizes case studies from superhero comics. In short, due to the intrinsic rhetorical

qualities of narrative (Fisher, 1987/1989, p. 158 – 179), superhero stories are necessarily pedagogical because, like other forms of literature, superhero narratives reveal values, follow logics, and make argument. Many scholars are aptly learning to utilize superherological narration in the classroom and other pedagogical and andragogical social settings.

From a pedagogical perspective, researchers should be especially interested in whether superherological scholarship might afford any advantages to teachers. As with all instructional endeavors, the answer depends on the aims, styles, and interest of the teacher. However, several noteworthy pedagogues have articulated benefits from superherology in their teaching experiences. As a sampling, in articles published for PsychologyToday, Langley (2018a; 2018b) asked several scholars who have contributed to edited volumes on popular culture and psychology (almost all of which had a superherological focus) to express why they favored teaching with fictional characters. Answers from the super-scholars varied, but included responses about pedagogical benefits such as accessing the moral dimensions of myth, the prominence of story as a reflection of cultural values, empathy through narrative perspective, connections to the potential interests and/or experiences of students, observable real-world impacts from fictional characters, approachability and accessibility of examples, and the reflective potential that comes by identifying with characters. Some scholars are also beginning to investigate how to maximize the pedagogical potential of fictional characters toward social learning well. For instance, Hammonds and Anderson-Lain (2016) have proposed a pedagogy of communion which would rely on popular culture narratives – such as superhero myths – as a catalyst for community-building. Much has yet to be discovered about the social learning potential for superherological narratives, making future research in this area vital to the growth of contemporary instructional scholarship.

Origins: How to Be a Superherologist

Research into superherology as a topic has only just begun. Although numerous scholars (of which only a few have been mentioned in this essay) have published work indicating the value of studying superheroes, additional study will be necessary to thoroughly understand how superhero stories operate and what they can teach. Perhaps the most important conclusion from the study presented in this essay is that there is a great need for future research in superherology.

Although superherology is not a discipline in which students may receive a degree, scholars might benefit from embracing the interdisciplinary elements of superherology as a topic. There are constraints which accompany the title of "academic discipline," which, when loosed, may offer scholars desirable freedom in exploring the nuances of a subject. In the case of superherology, researchers have already harnessed multiple methodologies and paradigms in their studies toward the benefit of having constructed a multifaceted gem of scholarship – a gem to be thoroughly appreciated and understood precisely

because of its many faces. In other words, no matter what discipline a researcher may identify with, they have the ability to apply their disciplinary knowledge toward the subject of superherology. All such research adds exquisite faces to superhero research discourse. Being an academic superherologist, then, does not mean *giving up* an academic identity (e.g., discipline) and trading it for another; but, rather, to *gain an identity* in the nuancing of one's research practices.

Additionally, superherology is beneficial as a *topic* because – unlike disciplines, in which reasoning and writing are rigorously governed – topics often seep out of the boundaries of academia. Superhero story consumers of all backgrounds play a key role in understanding, harnessing, and applying the power of superhero myths. For example, Botzakis' (2011) research from the field of reading indicated that superhero stories often act as theory-building grounds for their audiences, meaning that comics consumers use superherologic narrative as a context in which to explore their own conceptions of morality, ethics, social activity, etc. The stories also inspire critical conversation between members of reading communities (Hammonds and Anderson-Lain, 2016). In other words, superhero narratives can inspire their readers – regardless of whether the audience has any academic affiliation – to think critically, at the very least, about their morals, relationships, and social environment. The suggestion here is that anyone can do superherological work if they put their mind to studying superhero stories. Superheroes are often manifested in popular formats – such as movies, television, and comics – and, therefore, seem to be especially valuable pedagogical tools outside of the classroom. As previously noted, these narratives are comprised of coded history, values, and logics which can be excavated, understood, and utilized by virtually any discerning audience. Superherology must not be approached solely from an academic perspective, but also from a broader educational point of view.

In sum: in order for superherological work to thrive, academics must certainly turn their attention toward researching superhero mythos; however, superherology can only flourish if others also take up the mantle of critical thinking. The business leaders who develop organizational community through superhero comics (e.g., Gerde and Foster, 2007), movie-goers who use superhero stories to reflect on ethics with friends, and children who build relationships through common interests in superheroes are all doing the work of a superherologist. There are many other ways to take up this mantle as well. Each reader of this essay should take it upon themselves to be a superherologist by promoting common good through superhero stories in whatever way they can.

Denouement

Dr. Langley was unlikely to have meant "superherology" as a term of discipline when he first coined the word; but he certainly, whether somberly or playfully, gave academia a term for superhero scholarship that rings with legitimacy. Perhaps, in this way, he has offered scholars

a great gift by attempting to contribute to the de-stigmatization of a very productive and evocative line of research. For those who take up such research, many avenues are available. Superherological scholars may study the medium/form or myth/content (or both) of superhero narratives. Importantly, in the completion of their work, superherologists should embrace the interdisciplinarity of superhero studies being a topic instead of a discipline – allowing for experimental methodology, multifaceted approaches, and communal connections with other superherological scholars. Armed with greater knowledge of superherology, fans and scholars alike should take to exploring what may be learned from their favorite superhero stories.

References

Asay, P. (2012). *God on the streets of Gotham: What the big screen batman can teach us about god and ourselves*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House.

Botzakis, S. (2011). "To be a part of the dialogue": American adults reading comic books. *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics, 2*(2), 113-123.

Brooker, W. (2000/2005). *Batman unmasked: Analysing a cultural icon*. London: Continuum.

Eco, U. (1972). The myth of superman (N. Chilton, Trans.). *Diacritics*, 14-22.

Cohn, N. (2013/2014). *The visual language of comics: Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential images*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Franco, L., Roven, C., and Thomas, E. (Producers) & Nolan, C. (Director). (2005). *Batman begins* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Gerde, V. W., & Foster, R. S. (2007). X-Men ethics: Using comic books to teach business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 77, 245-258.

Gronbeck, B. (2005). Is communication a humanities discipline? *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 4(3), 229-246.

Groensteen, T. (2013). *Comics and narration*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hammonds, K. A., and Anderson-Lain, K. (2016). A pedagogy of communion: Theorizing popular culture pedagogy. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 4, 106-132.

HSU. (n.d.).*Travis Langley*. Retrieved from: http://www.hsu.edu/directory/people/professors/travislangley.html.

Langley, T. (2018a, March). Why popular culture psychology? The power of story. Retrieved from: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-heroes-andvillains/201803/why-popular-culture-psychology-the-power-story.

Langley, T. (2018b, February). Why popular culture psychology? What's the point? Retrieved from: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-heroes-and-villains/201802/why-popular-culture-psychology-whats-the-point.

Langley, T. (2012). *Batman and psychology: A dark and stormy knight*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Langley, T. (2012). About the author. In Langley, T. (2012). Which batman? In *Batman and psychology: A dark and stormy knight*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Lawrence, J. S., & Jewett, R. (2002). *The myth of the American superhero*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Lopes, P. (2006). Culture and stigma: Popular culture and the case of comic books. *Sociological Forum*, 21(3), 387-414**.**

Pearce, W. B. (1985). Scientific research methods in communication studies and their implications for theory and research. In *Speech communication in the twentieth century*. (Benson, T. Ed.) Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 255-281.

Reynolds, R. (1992). Super heroes: A modern mythology. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississipppi.

Rosenberg, R. S., & Coogan, P. (2013). *What is a superhero?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tondro, J. (2011). *Superheroes of the Round Table: Comics connections to Medieval and Renaissance literature*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Travislangley.info. (n.d.) *Batman syllabus*. Retrieved from: http://www.travislangley.info/?page_id=378.

White, M. D., and Arp, R. (2008). *Batman and philosophy: The dark knight of the soul*. John Wiley & Sons.

Author Note

Kyle A. Hammonds (MS, University of North Texas; BS, Texas A&M University – Commerce) is a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma. Please send correspondence to: Kyle A. Hammonds, Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA. Tel. (405) 325-3111. Email: kyle.a.hammonds@ou.edu