

Bibliotherapy from a Person-centered Perspective



The paper aims to give a general overview of a person-centered basis for bibliotherapy services. It suggests to place emphasis on some of the emotional potentials hidden within and between the readers, taking into consideration the various aspects of the group process phenomenon. According to this approach, reading materials are tools that match the special needs of the reader so that they open up personal aspects of meanings, and elicit readers' subjective emotional response. Personal interpretations are shaped by one's identity and life-experience, accompanied by group interactions and co-constructions of meanings which may lead the person toward new attitudes and motivations. The second part of the paper invites colleagues to join a European bibliotherapy network, initiating a joint effort for development of innovative, person-centered services applicable regionally. Besides offering continuing education and research partnerships, the most important outcome of this project will be an international bibliotherapy database for connecting people to helpful and inspiring books, providing health information. The planned service can add to the reader's advisory toolkit of librarians, complement traditional therapies, and extend peoples' support outside of traditional settings.

Introduction

Bibliotherapy is the interactive use of reading and writing, promoting personal growth, mental health and wellbeing of people from various gender and age groups in different social contexts, living with or without mental health problems. The working definition of bibliotherapy I will use for this paper is inclusive, means that a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, printed or non-printed materials is appropriate for bibliotherapeutic purposes such as:

fiction books and texts – classic and contemporary imaginative literature (e.g. poetry, short stories, novels, drama, tales)

other imaginative or semi-imaginative genres (e.g. song lyrics, chick lit, theme-appropriate movies, therapeutic stories, folk tales, Hasidic tales)

non-fiction (e.g. documentaries, letters, philosophy, case histories, autobiographies and personal recovery stories, self-help books, self-help brochures, online self-help resources) (Mazza, 2003; Norcross, 2013)

All materials matching the focus of the therapy and participants' needs can be relevant to spark the discussion, and as such, they can open up personal aspects of meanings within multiple interpretations and help people to reflect on their life. It is just the difference of individuals' personal response shaped by their identity and life-experience, the dialectical net of meaningful interpretations and insights gained in the light of the therapeutic relationship, that is important to consider.

Materials serve as mental health tools to spark the dialogue between the therapist/counselor/facilitator and the participants who often become deeply engaged in the dialogue, share personal feelings, ideas and life-experience and start to understand and re-evaluate them in a new light. Materials create new perceptions in relationship to the readers' selves, others, and the world. The creative focus is within self, creating new feelings, attitudes and motivations for action. (Hynes, 1981)

The notion represented by Hynes (1981) and Cohen (1989) places emphasis on participants' therapeutic experience, examining therapeutic reading as a group process phenomenon. Participants' emotional experiences and interpersonal processes between them are central, taking into consideration the wide range of therapeutic factors (Yalom, 1995). If dealing with the multiple emotional factors through a person-centered bibliotherapeutic process, I would suggest an integrative model of bibliotherapy, based on the so called 'person-centered approach' applied in the humanistic psychology. (Rogers, 1995)

The main inspiration for my integrative model comes from the notion of the so called 'person-centered expressive arts therapy', developed by Natalie Rogers, daughter of Carl Rogers. Natalie Rogers applied the main principles of the person-centered theory on the basis of expressive arts, using the emotional, intuitive aspect of the person and provided psychological support through various media such as movement, psychodramatic improvisation, music, visual art and creative writing. As she argues, expressive arts stimulate self-exploration. Feelings can be constructively channeled into creative activities that allow the person to uncover previously unknown aspects of self, bringing to light new information and awareness, supporting her/him to discover an essential inner source of self-acceptance and self-integration. „The goal is to become whole people, more fully actualized and empowered.“ (Rogers, 1993, p. 248.) The person-centered process in bibliotherapy works very similarly, using language arts (reading and writing) as creative tools to support personal growth. The following diagram shows the elements of this process, based on Carl Rogers' principles.



The emotional elements of the person-centered bibliotherapy process

This model takes people as active, autonomous agents of their own life. The main goal is to enable the person to gain insight in a new light and find personal solutions. People attending bibliotherapy have the opportunity to be involved in deep encounters and intimate exchanges with the materials, the facilitator and each other which motivates them to share and change. This happens in a safe, emotionally supportive environment where members accept and appreciate each other even when they disagree, so they can reveal themselves honestly and learn about themselves and from each other's reflections and life-experiences.

As it can be seen from the diagram, a set of activities for developing EQ are involved in this process like, for instance, becoming capable to perceive, express and understand one's emotions and ideas, capability to share personal emotional experiences, acceptance of ourselves and others, practice of giving and getting support and feedback. Among these dynamic processes the influence of the readings or other materials is just one factor which is not enough to make an effective therapy. (Béres, 2016b)

Given this model is person-centered instead of the book-centered approach of the traditional model of bibliotherapy, it suggests to deal with some potentials hidden within and between the participant persons. (Béres, 2016b) The readings and other materials elicit participants' subjective emotional response shaped by their identity and life-experience, offering a tool for their projections. Therefore, as Holland argues, „meaning is not a static set of relevancies, but a dynamic process of transforming one kind of relevancy, unconscious, to another, conscious“. (Holland, 1968, p. 28.) From this viewpoint the main question of

bibliotherapy is about why the certain person responds to literary works and other materials as s/he does, and how her/his introjections shape the personal interpretation of the materials. Thus enables the participant to stand both inside and outside that interpretation so as to observe and understand it. This act of insight, accompanied by group interactions and co-constructions of meanings may help people to reflect on their lives, and lead the person toward new attitudes and new motivations for action.

Following the person-centered model, a new perspective of bibliotherapy opens up, in which the supported person and the improvement of her/his personal mental health and wellbeing are central. From this viewpoint a wide range of potential texts are appropriate for the purposes of bibliotherapy, as the therapeutic effect is not exclusively about the catharsis caused by high-quality imaginative literature, and, in addition, it is definitely not about the participants' literary education. However the most often used texts are from genres of imaginative literature, those choices are match the reading preferences and comfort zone of the bibliotherapists, much more than the participants' needs. That's why it's time to re-evaluate this practice in the light of experience, since it has been proved that song lyrics, autobiographies, personal recovery stories, self-help books, chick lit etc. can be effectively involved in bibliotherapy resulting no reduction in quality and effectiveness (see examples from Mazza, 2003; Norcross, 2013; Walker, 2014; or readings from The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001).

The same lesson learned can be identified in the case of creative/expressive writing which plays an important role in many bibliotherapeutic works. Bibliotherapists usually apply sample texts from poets, asking participants to write similar, strong messages about themselves, or simply write a diary, a memoir or continue a poem or story from the viewpoint of their past and current emotional experiences. These writings have a strong therapeutic value, not equivalent with their literary value, mirroring personal experience. (see for instance the Kirklees collection from poems and novels written by bibliotherapy participants, 2014) Writing as a therapeutic tool help the client to translate strong emotions into language, leading to gain insight, understand human motivations, externalise selfhood, reduce loneliness, frustration and distress. (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Wright & Bolton, 2012)

Education and Networking in Person-centered Bibliotherapy

In February 2014 the Department of Library & Information Science of the University of Pécs started a continuing professional training programme in bibliotherapy which has become the center of the person-centered approach in this field.

This two-year-long post-graduate programme is available for BA or MA degree holders in arts and humanities, teacher training, mental health care, medical sciences, economy, law, and pastoration. Our trainees are usually practitioners from various fields who would like to use therapeutic reading and writing to complement their work (such as librarians, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health workers, social workers, addiction counselor assistants, bereavement assistants, HR professionals, theologians etc.). On completion of the qualification the trainees will be able to plan and facilitate person-centered, interactive sessions using imaginative literature, non-fiction materials and creative writing, promoting personal growth. Our bibliotherapists provide bibliotherapy sessions in various settings of public institutions and local community (e.g. in public libraries, schools, prisons, shelter houses, care homes, psychiatric wards, rehabilitation services). The biggest part of our bibliotherapy sessions work in closed, small groups organized in theme-appropriated approach. For instance, there are bibliotherapy groups for vulnerable women (adolescents, pregnant women, abused mothers living in shelter house, prisoners, elderly, cancer rehabilitation patients). In addition, groups are available for other people suffering from substance abuse, social disadvantages, normative life crises, traumas, partnership problems, dementia, parenting, imprisoning, and mental health issues.

In the recent few years the popularity of bibliotherapy services is increasing. This tendency raises questions of educational opportunities and research partnerships. The 'Pécs School' established new research partnerships with Finnish and British bibliotherapists. We started to offer bibliotherapy workshops for those countries where no bibliotherapy education is available, for instance in the Czech Republic. Until now our partners are from the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Finland, United Kingdom, and Italy. Our main goal is to build a network both in research and education as well as in the field of public services. In 2015 we initiated a joint effort for development of innovative, person-centered services applicable regionally. (Béres, 2016a). Besides offering workshops and research partnerships, the most important outcome of this project is an international bibliotherapy database which is under construction at the moment. The database aims to connect people to helpful and inspiring books, highlights useful materials and provide health information for users and their families. This database gains inspiration from an external partner, the Center of Alcohol Studies Library at the Rutgers University in New Brunswick (NJ, USA). Within their project titled 'Reading for Recovery' (R4R) led by a medical librarian, Judit Hajnal Ward, they are building a bibliotherapy database targeting patients, families and professionals related to alcohol issues. Our database follows the R4R as a best practice, but tends to cover more topics and target groups with which we have multiple experiences. We plan to collect best practices in bibliotherapy and offer multilingual bibliotherapeutic descriptions of materials bibliotherapists can apply. This database can add also to the reader's advisory toolkit of librarians, complement traditional therapies, and extend peoples' support outside of traditional settings. It would be nice to involve more countries to create the database items in their national languages, adding their best practices to the collection.

Concluding, I would like to invite colleagues from every European regions (also from Slovakia) who are willing to be involved in this work.

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