

Vol. 19, July 2013, Issue 2

**NIGERIAN JOURNAL
OF CLINICAL AND
COUNSELLING
PSYCHOLOGY**

ISSN: 1118 - 4035



Nigerian Journal
of
Clinical and Counselling Psychology

Vol. 19, July 2013, Issue 2.

ISSN: 1118 – 4035

Nigerian Journal of Clinical and Counselling Psychology

Vol. 19 July 2013, Issue 2. ISSN: 1118 – 4035;

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Bibliotherapy: The Secret to Improving Problem Behaviours

Olaronke O. Fagbola
*Ibadan Study Centre Library,
National Open University of Nigeria*

S.O. Popoola
*Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies
Faculty of Education,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan. Nigeria*

Abstract

The place of bibliotherapy in the improvement of deviant behaviour was discussed. The processes, basic procedures in conducting bibliotherapy and levels of bibliotherapy were highlighted. Also, the benefits, relevance and limitations of bibliotherapeutic processes were stated and it was concluded that though bibliotherapy is a widely employed adjunct to therapeutic process, it is important to remember that it is not a cure-all but just another tool in a practitioner's box to deal with the varied emotional, behavioural and social issues of his/her clients.

Key Words: Bibliotherapy, Reading behaviour, Problem behaviour

Introduction

It is a general belief that reading is a worthwhile and effective method of treating and improving problematic and deviant behaviours (Kolade, 2012). Books are regarded as tools to be used with intelligent expectation of getting results (Sisson, 2014). The use of books for therapeutic purposes has become commonly known as 'bibliotherapy'. Self-help books have been used for many years and are prescribed as a means of providing psychological therapy for people experiencing emotional and psychological difficulties (www.cavanlibrary.org). In the past, bibliotherapy was only used for patients in mental hospitals and for people that were seriously ill, although today it has widespread use. Many educators and adults have

resorted to bibliotherapy to help individuals and groups deal with normal and emotional problems they encounter (Rubin, 1978). Today, bibliotherapy is a professional field where mental health experts and educators explore how our natural affinity for stories can support our general well-being and even provide a healing influence for illness and trauma. The field of bibliotherapy obliges the guidance of professionals, which commonly include trained librarians/teachers, social workers, psychologists or health practitioners.

What is Bibliotherapy?

The word bibliotherapy had its root in two Greek words *biblion* – book and *therapeia* – healing (Barcelo-Macahilig, 2011). The practice of bibliotherapy has existed and has been since ancient times (Beatty, 2013). The history of bibliotherapy is rooted in the simple reading of texts which were sometimes able to produce spontaneous benefits, as a result of their ability to provoke reflections and positive emotional reactions which may motivate, inform, or even teach the reader/listeners strategies for dealing with problems (www.en.benessere.com, 2014). Initially, the term was used to define attempts to prescribe books deemed capable to support personal growth and resolve problems, a method essentially consisting of experimental forms of reading abbreviated passages or entire books deemed capable of activating self-help within the patient (Desy, 2013). Simply stated, bibliotherapy can be defined as a therapeutic process that involves the use of reading materials to help a client solve emotional, mental, personal, behavioural and social problems (Feather & Sturges, 2003). Sometimes referred to as biblioguidance, bibliocounseling, literatherapy, bookmatching or reading therapy, bibliotherapy involves the use of books and other media to facilitate both normal development and clinically significant problems (Pehrsson and McMillen, 2007). Bibliotherapy or the therapeutic value of reading is simply the use of reading to help people in any situation in life (www.westminister.gov.uk, 2014).

Bibliotherapy, as a clinical concept and intervention refers to the use of literature to help people cope more successfully with emotional problems or life changes, or to produce effective change and promote personality

development (Silverberg, 2003). Bibliotherapy lies at the intersection between literacy, social-emotional intervention, and therapeutic group work (www.frua.org, 2014). It is a tool that parents can easily use to open the doors of communication with their children. Bibliotherapy also permits the child to "try out" new ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving within the relative safety of literature (Shechtman, 2009). It is an extension of the humanitarian side of librarianship which recognizes the therapeutic powers of literature and benefits which can be derived by the readers (Sisson, 2014). It equally serves as a tool for meeting developmental needs of individuals. It is the process of using books to help children think about, understand, and work through social and emotional concerns (Shechtman, 2009). Reading with children can be therapeutic. Adults can use reading to help children come to grips with issues that create emotional turmoil for them. Reading can also be very effective in preventing and resolving behaviour problems (Barancik, 2014).

According to McIntyre (2014) bibliotherapy is a techniques used for instructing interaction between a facilitator and a participant. It is implemented when a problem exists, the reader becomes personally involved with the situations and characters in the books, and a problem is addressed. The process of bibliotherapy may be used as a tool for patient treatment, medical diagnosis, and the prevention of illness relating to psycho-social dysfunction, allowing for gradual and mutual insight into patient complaints over time (Fitzgerald, 2014). It may display efficacy on intellectual, psycho-social, interpersonal, emotional, and behavioural levels. The use of bibliotherapy has expanded and is currently employed in nearly every helping profession, with every age group, and with multiple populations (Shechtman, 2009). It can be used by different types of helpers with many different ages and concerns. Bibliotherapy involves the use of books as a point of entry to discussion by adults with children. It encourages intellectual and emotional contact with children and makes important steps toward establishing healthful relationships with them (Silverberg, 2003).

Bibliotherapeutic process has found successful application in psychiatry, education, correctional homes

(prisons, remand homes), and general medical fields. Bibliotherapy is a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature-an interaction which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth (Russell and Shrodes, 1950) in (Silverberg, 2003). It is a program of selected activity involving reading materials planned, conducted, and controlled as treatment under the guidance of the physician for emotional and other problems. Bibliotherapy involves the use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuncts in medicine and in psychiatry; and guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading; the use of literature to treat mental, emotional and nervous disorders (Barcelo-Macahilig, 2011).

According to Duffy, Haslam, Holl, and Walker (2013) bibliotherapy is the use of reading creatively books, stories and poems to make people feel better in themselves, about themselves and about others. It is about reading and a passion for reading. Bibliotherapy is also about sharing that passion, enthusiasm and delight with another individual or group of people. We all know how reading can take us out of ourselves and into another world. Conversely, reading can show us our own life mirrored in that of another person. If we are feeling miserable or alone, sharing our experience in this way can help us to feel less isolated and our empathy with others is extended as is our imagination and understanding.

Bibliotherapy attempts to open up that world of pleasure to the people it works with, to make their lives richer, and allow them to pass on their own pleasure and enjoyment of the things they have read to others. It attempts to reshape the patient-reader's thinking, which ideally may result in a positive attitudinal or behavioural change. Bibliotherapy taps into this potential of reading by sharing books, stories and poems with groups or individuals - talking about books, recommending them or simply reading aloud. It offers reading choices for the new or reluctant reader and stimulation for the jaded one. Bibliotherapy gives people confidence to talk about their response to a book and in their reading preferences and choices (Duffy, et. al., 2013). It encourages them to share their own reading and make connections with other individuals, groups and organisations. The shapes of books we have all read hang in the wardrobe of

our minds like clothes we have taken off and hung up to wait their season.

Bibliotherapy is considered by some to be a science requiring expert medical opinion, and by others as "an art to be practiced by a single individual who has an understanding of people, a wide knowledge of books, and is sympathetic to human needs". Be that as it may, Cronje, (1993) noted that the art of bibliotherapy requires the same expertise as the science and this is demonstrated by non-medical professionals such as librarians, guidance counsellors and teachers many of whom are in fact practicing bibliotherapy without being aware that they are using the technique. As a science, it involves a directed therapy defined as a family of technique for structuring interaction between a facilitator and a participant based on the mutual sharing of literature. Bibliotherapy focuses on treating those who suffer from serious physical or mental illness under the close direction of a medical professional (Barcelo-Macahilig, 2011).

The Process of Bibliotherapy

According to Barcelo-Macahilig (2011); and Fries-Gaithe (2009) bibliotherapeutic process includes

1. **Identification:** Here the reader associates self with a character or situation in a book. As a result, the formation of values and social attitudes occur.
2. **Catharsis:** The reader shares the feelings and motivation of the book's character, which is one, reacts to the symbolic experience in literature as if it is an actual experience.
3. **Insight:** The reader realizes his/her situation can be dealt with more effectively by imitating or adapting the ideas from the reading materials i.e this starts the change of personality.

Basic procedures in conducting Bibliotherapy

- Motivate the individual(s) with introductory activities.
- Provide time for reading the material.
- Allow incubator time.
- Provide follow-up discussion time, using questions that will lead persons from literal recall of information

through interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of that information.

- Conduct evaluation and direct the individual(s) toward closure (Barcelo-Macahilig, 2011).

Bibliotherapy can serve as a vehicle for presenting challenging ideas, promoting the growth of important concepts, and fostering the development of personal insight for all clients. The effects of bibliotherapy may occur on intellectual, psycho-social, interpersonal, emotional, and behavioural levels. According to Pehrsson and McMillen (2005) short stories, drama, and prose excerpts have been used successfully to address topics such as adolescence, alcoholism, anger management, compassion, courtship, family, fear, self-identity, justice, life and death, loneliness, love, marriage, parent-child relationships, revenge, self-image, and sexuality. Bibliotherapy helps to expand the patient-reader's awareness, unmask and offer insight into latent personal issues and suggest solutions that have helped others cope with feelings and situations similar to their own including separation or loss caused by human interactions. It can take shape in many forms, from reading about someone who has gone through a similar experience to choosing a book because you're looking for some tips on how to unwind and relax (www.westminister.gov.uk, 2014). According to Silverberg (2003) children use stories, tales, and fables as a means of finding parallels to their problems and needs even before they can read.

Bibliotherapy can be prescribed by a family physician as a medication to promote health education and it can be used in treating patients for numerous conditions, including psycho-social conditions (such as depression, the effects of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, grief and loss, marital or sexual dysfunction) and medical conditions such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension, smoking, obesity, heart disease (Silverberg, 2003). The goal of bibliotherapy is to promote behavioural change in a normative direction and it can be done with or without very little intervention using didactic or literary texts.

Models of Bibliotherapy

According to Duffy, et. al., (2013) bibliotherapy can be roughly divided into two models -medical or social.

(A) Medical Model: The medical model of bibliotherapy was developed in America. It involves the use of counsellors or therapists. They usually worked with a particular client group (children and teens) in a setting chosen by them. Literature and more specifically poetry was used to help clients identify and deal with problems in their own lives through a closely monitored process of reading, discussion and questioning. The counsellor/therapist plays a key role when conducting bibliotherapy and are responsible to motivate the client, provide time to read the selected readings and provide follow-up time to discuss the literature.... discussion of thoughts, feelings and emotions helps the client gain insight.

(B) Social Model: The social model is more flexible allowing for a wider range of clients, reading materials and settings. The series of meetings may take place in a hospital. Equally, they may take place in a library, community centre, care home or in a client's own home. Referrals may be taken from health professionals, librarians, teachers, social workers, relatives or friends. Clients can also self-refer. There is no prescribed reading list instead a wide range of reading material is used such as novels, adult and children's, short stories, biographies and poems as well as newspaper or magazine articles. This model can also be tailored to the requirements of your service and/or funding and the needs of your clients.

Levels of Bibliography

Three levels of bibliotherapy may be distinguished. These are developmental, clinical applications and institutional level (Pehrsson and McMillen, 2009; Fries-Gaither, 2009; and Cronje, 1993).

1. **The Developmental Level:** This level involves the use of literature and facilitative processes by skilled helpers like librarians/teachers, social workers, psychologists or health practitioners to assist individuals in dealing with life transitions and normal developmental issues. It

involves the use of imaginative or didactic information media or a combinative of both with groups of normal individuals in the community. The group is led by a bibliotherapist and an educator to foster normal development, self-realization and mental health

2. **Clinical Applications Level:** This involve the use of literature and facilitative processes by skilled mental health or medical practitioners in meeting specific therapeutic goals for the purpose of assisting individuals in dealing with severe disorders and traumatic life experiences. It uses imaginative information media for groups of clients with emotional and behavioural problems. The team is made up of a bibliotherapist and a clinical worker seeking the attainment of insight and change in conduct and behaviour.
3. **Institutional Level:** This involves the use of didactic information media for individual institutionalized clients. It embraces the medical and psychiatric use of bibliotherapy, with a person-to-person situation through a bibliotherapist working with a medical team. A noticeable characteristic common to all categories is that, the given professional assigns or recommends particular texts and refers to or discusses them within the learning, medical, or counseling relationship.

Source material used for Bibliotherapy

Media suitable for use include written and audio-visual materials, both subject and imaginative (Silverberg, 2003; Cronje, 1993). Generally, books have universal appeal and much to offer in that we are wired for stories, learn from stories and healed with stories (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2009). According to Silverberg (2003) the basic resources used in administering bibliotherapy are:

1. **Didactic Texts:** These can be a literary text, biography or auto-biography which fosters an imaginative response from the patient-reader. They are instructional and educational and are similar to textbooks used in the

traditional educational process. They can be found for nearly any topic from child rearing, marriage and sexuality, personality conflicts, stress. Its purpose is to facilitate a direct change within the individual through a cognitive understanding of self.

2. **Imaginative Texts:** These are dramatic presentation of human behaviour through fiction, poetry, drama, biography and auto-biography. Imaginative texts have the potential to bring about changes within an individual because it is more likely to produce an emotional experience which is an essential element (evidence of) for effective therapy.

Categories of Bibliotherapist

This includes Librarians, Counsellors, Teachers, Social workers, Psychologist, Mental Health Professionals, Parents and Ministers.

Characteristics of Bibliotherapist

According to Phersson and McMillen, 2009; Cronje, (1993), some of the major characteristics of a bibliotherapist includes the following:

- Warm and honest.
- Emotional stability.
- Fairness.
- Receptiveness for change.
- Ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally.
- Objectivity.
- Healthy judgment.
- Intuition.
- Self-assurance.
- Sensitivity.
- Empathy.
- Humorous.
- Initiative.
- Authority to get things done.
- Understand people thoroughly.
- Have a wide knowledge of books.
- Sympathetic to human needs.

Why engaged in Bibliotherapy?

According to Barcleo-Macahilig (2011), bibliotherapeutic intervention may be undertaken for the following reasons:

- To develop an individual's self-concept.
- To increase an individual's understanding of human behaviour or motivation.
- To foster an individual's honest self-appraisal.
- To provide a way for a person to find interests outside of self.
- To relieve emotional or mental pressure.
- To show an individual that (s)he is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem.
- To show an individual that there is more than one solution to a problem.
- To help a person discuss a problem more freely.
- To help an individual plan a constructive course of action to solve a problem.
- To provide support to those grieving the loss of a loved ones.
- To provide support to those with chronic or terminal illnesses.
- To provide support to those in the helping profession.

Benefits of Bibliotherapy

According to Barcelo-Macahilig (2011); and Phresson and McMillen (2009) activities in bibliotherapy are designed

- To provide information.
- To provide insight.
- To stimulate discussion about problems.
- To communicate new values and attitudes.
- To create awareness that other people have similar problem.
- To provide realistic solution to problems.
- To increase reading skills.
- To develop new skills by sharing good practice.
- To increase self-awareness, clarification of emerging values and development of one's ethnic/cultural identity.

- For empathic understanding of others and an increased appreciation of different cultures, viewpoints and lived experiences.
- Reduction in negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and loneliness and replacement by positive behaviour and feelings.
- Coping skills can be improved as alternative responses to problems are explored.
- Self-esteem, interpersonal skills and emotional maturity are often facilitated.
- The process can serve as a stimulus or vehicle for expression of emotions and telling of one's own story.

Relevance of Bibliotherapy

According to Duffy, et.al (2013) bibliotherapy has been used to address a sizable range of problems. These include aggressiveness, self-destructive behaviours, adoption/ foster care, diversity awareness / valuation, death and dying, chemical dependency (drug/substance abuse), divorce, obsessive-compulsive disorder, giftedness, conflict resolution, child abuse / neglect, nightmares, ethnic identity, depression, separation and loss, family violence, homelessness. Pehrsson and McMillen (2005) stated that bibliotherapy has been employed in nearly every helping profession, with every age group and in multiple populations. Among the groups that use bibliotherapy are librarians, school counsellors, social workers, mental health nurses, and teachers. Bibliotherapy encourages effective social behaviour, clarifies values, and instils cultural identity and ethnic pride. Bibliotherapy is applicable to individuals and groups. Group benefits include feedback from others concerning interpretations and behaviours and opportunities for modelling and improving communication Pehrsson & McMillen, 2007).

Limitations to Bibliotherapeutic Process

Limitations to bibliography according to Barcelo-Macahilig (2011) includes the following:

- The non availability of materials on certain topics.
- Lack of readiness and willingness to read on the part of the client.

- Clients may be defensive thus discounting the actions of characters and failing to identify with them.
- Facilitators may have limited knowledge of human development and developmental problems, and inadequate knowledge about appropriate literature.
- Clients may be unwilling to discuss areas that are uncomfortable or facilitators may insist on making a point at the client's expense.
- If both the client and counsellor stay on surface issues (client(s) not wanting the counsellor to probe further).

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy is best used by prepared practitioners who are skilled and supervised in its application. Reading books is recognized as a means to helping individuals deal with deep concerns and can offer strategies specific to developmental issues (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2007). Although bibliotherapy is a widely employed adjunct to the therapeutic process with broad applications, it encourages change within the individual and its use is not restricted to times when a crisis is present. It is important to remember that bibliotherapy is not a cure-all, nor will it reach every client in the same manner. Instead, it is just another tool in a practitioner's box to deal with the varied emotional, behavioural, and social issues of his/her clients.

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