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Bibliotherapy for Women from a Lifelong Learning Perspective

Judit BÉRES

University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

beres.judit@kpvk.pte.hu

The aim of this paper is to investigate the practice of bibliotherapy to provide a basis for bibliotherapy services aiming at women. 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.

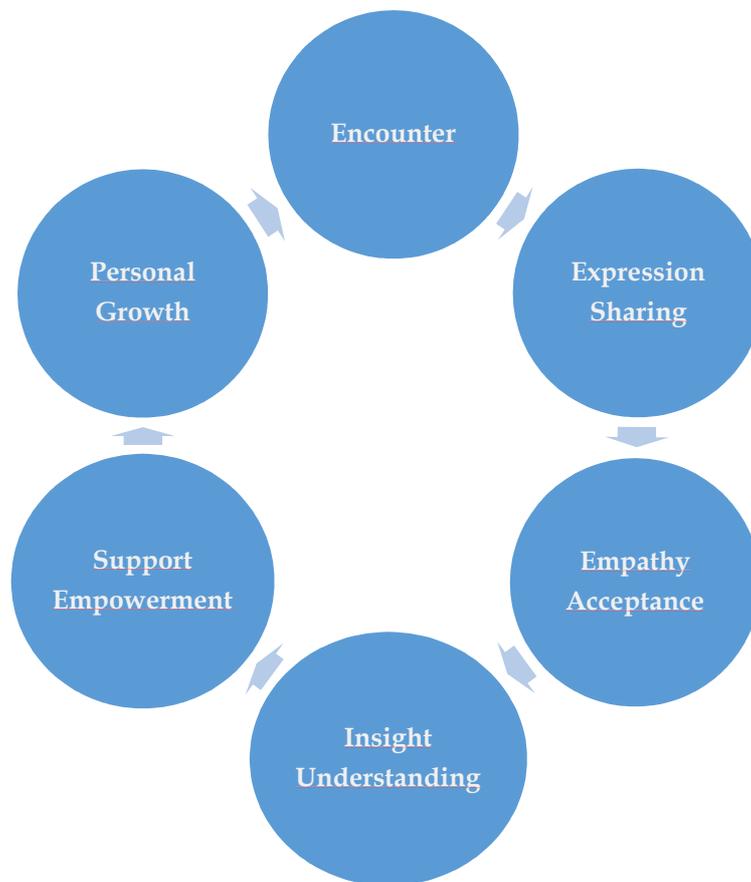
The working definition of bibliotherapy I will use for this paper is inclusive, means that a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, printed or non-printed materials is appropriate for bibliotherapeutic purposes such as:

- 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, new attitudes and new motivations for action (Hynes, 1981).

According to Hynes (1981) and Cohen (1989), my bibliotherapy programmes introduced here are person-centered in character. This notion place emphasys on the participants's 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).



This model offers a view of people as active, autonomous agents of the improvement of their own life who, through deep encounters and intimate exchanges with the materials, the facilitator and each other, evolve an emotionally supportive environment in the bibliotherapy group, a net of interpersonal processes. 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.

Given this model is person-centered instead of the book-centered approach of the traditional model, it suggests to deal with some potentials hidden within and between the participant persons. 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, 1968:28). 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 might lead the person toward new attitudes and new motivations for action.

As the main goal of the bibliotherapeutic intervention aiming at women is providing direct psychological support, the main contribution of this type of work might be identified and evaluated from the viewpoint of feminist psychotherapy, as this work tries to give voice to women by empowering them, and encourages sensitizing people toward women's issues (Worell & Remer, 2003). Resulting from this feminist approach, the main topics of our applied materials were strongly related to the multiple and rich range of female identities, discussing crucial issues women might face through the whole life-span e.g. crisis, challenges, opportunities in personal relationships, motherhood, professional career etc. Best practices such as the UK and USA based bibliotherapy services for women provided by women's libraries and feminist psychotherapists usually represent a direct feminist approach, as they acknowledge the effects of the sociopolitical context of women's behaviors and troubles, using imaginative literature, self-help and clinical books (mostly, but not exclusively written for women by women) that meet the users' needs as woman-affirming, empowering materials (Cather, 2007; Chrisler & Ulsh, 2001). However my programmes don't follow systematically the principles of a direct feminist approach, I agree with their values, and I usually take into consideration feminist interpretations when choosing literature.

In the followings I give a general overview of the therapeutic reading, writing and discussion programmes aiming at women, provided in different settings of the city of Pécs (Hungary) such as in secondary school, public library, shelter house, and senior academy. Through the comparison of the contents of the tables, it is easier to imagine and evaluate the contribution of these programmes, influenced by the different developmental tasks and emotional needs of participant women. It can be seen how the diversity of the developmental tasks, participants' needs and life-experiences shapes a lifelong perspective when dealing with identity work completed through the triad of female life-cycles (as daughters-mothers-grandmothers) and, of course, simply as independent persons.

Table 1 summarizes the main topics discussed in detail, materials used and additional creative tasks given in a three-month-long bibliotherapy group organised for 6 disadvantaged, gifted adolescents in a secondary school. All group members were aged 15-16 and female, except the only one gipsy boy of age 17. All of them came from a socially deprived family, and studied in a special class supporting gifted students' empowerment. The boy played a double role in the group: he was a role model as he gained opportunities toward a successful career path, and he represented 'the male voice' through group discussions. Our bibliotherapy sessions run with one facilitator, every second or third week (depending on their schedule), with 1,5-2 hours long discussions. This helped these students to learn new strategies for dealing with their social and emotional issues, and supported their empowerment, meaning breaking out of disadvantages and working out opportunities based on giftedness (Béres, 2015). As it can be seen, creative/expressive writing played an important role in most of our therapeutic works. We usually applied warm-up identity plays and used model texts from Hungarian poets, asking participants to write similar, strong messages about themselves, or simply continue a poem or story from the viewpoint of their past and current emotional experiences. These writing activities help to gain insight, understand human motivations, express feelings, externalise selfhood, reduce loneliness, frustration and distress (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Wright & Bolton, 2012).

Table 1. Bibliotherapy for disadvantaged gifted adolescents

<i>Topics discussed</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Creative tasks</i>
holding and caring in human relationships, love, patience, values	János Pilinszky: Secrets of our religion– Advent (philosophy)	Petra Finy: I introduce myself (poem); write 5 characteristics about how you see yourself + 5 as Others might see you
self-confidence, giftedness, emotional resourcefulness, resilience	The wings of Lotilko (Tunguz folktale)	read Ágnes Ágai's adolescent poems, write a similar poem about yourself
daydreams, desires, plans, career & identity	Frigyes Karinthy: Meeting with a young man (short story)	write a letter with recommendations to the 8-9 years younger yourself
supportive/destructive relationships (family, love, friendships), barriers, coping	Ervin Lázár: The girl closed in a hat (tale)	write sms letters similarly to Dániel Varró's Heart dessert (poem)
role models, youth trends, positive/negative self-image, body image	Krisztina Tóth: The Soul is Megabody (short story)	write an advertisement about yourself similar to Virág Erdős' Liar tale (poem)

happiness, successful life, self-criticism, resourcefulness	Sándor Márai: Herbarium (About happiness); Sándor Weöres: Toward completeness (The source – Mirrors facing each other) (philosophy)	evaluation through feeling cards (Bear Cards, Dixit)
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Table 2 summarizes the main topics and materials of a three-month-long bibliotherapy group, run in the children’s library section of a public library. Members were two pregnant women with their partners and one pair of a pregnant woman and her mother (a future grandmother). All of them were middle-class and graduated. We hosted also a female librarian student interested in bibliotherapy who participated as an active group member. Our bibliotherapy sessions run every second or third week (depending on their schedule), with one facilitator and 1,5-2 hours long discussions. In this group I didn’t apply any writing task (except the completion of the final questionnaire) as it was not necessary to open up and motivate group members. The aim of the group was to prepare young parents and grandparents for the new life with the baby, including the significant changes and challenges of their relationship and everyday life management. We discussed visions and expectations in relation to parents’ role models, and started a deeply honest dialog about the emotional experience of pregnancy, birth and parenting, aiming to increase participants’ self-confidence, and provide them relevant information for reducing fears and stress of the coming unknown situation. In addition, a list of further readings was given to the group members, representing additional suggested sources from baby books and parenting literature (Béres, 2014).

Table 2. Bibliotherapy for parents-to-be

<i>Topics discussed</i>	<i>Materials</i>
self-help and clinical books on parenthood; myths and reality; self-confidence	Dániel Varró: Studying scientific resources on parenthood (poem); Krisztina Tóth: Briefly about female sexuality (short story)
meanings of waiting (Advent, newborn baby), patience, emotional adaptability, support	János Pilinszky: Secrets of our religion – Advent (philosophy); Dániel Varró: Waiting for a baby (poem)
fantasies about prenatal life within the womb, prenatal psychological needs, communication with the baby, planning and preparations	Attila Szabó: Tummy Tale (novel)
birth fantasies, birth experience, assistance, emotional support, primary bonding	Anna T. Szabó: The Labour Ward (poem)

childcare task division, shared parenting attitudes, family support, personal growth during parenting	Dániel Varró: Lullaby for fathers (poem); Margit Kaffka: Lackó (poem)
trials and tribulations of parenting, coping with motherhood, survival of the baby years, enjoying parenthood, self-confidence	Libby Purves: How NOT to be a perfect mother (memoir)
role models, visions and expectations about parenthood, conflict management, healthy personal boundaries	Dániel Varró: Misi and the discipline (diary); Lőrinc Szabó: Lóci Becomes a Giant (poem)

Table 3 summarizes the main topics and materials of a five-month-long bibliotherapy group, run in a shelter house hosting mothers in crisis, with 5 participants, each undereducated, in their early or middle adulthood. Every group session lasted 1,5-2 hours, with meetings every second or third week (depending on mothers' work). The hosting institution serves as a crisis intervention shelter service where young mothers have the opportunity to live for 1,5 year with their 1-2 small children in five little flats, and after that they have to move out and try to live on their own. In fact, helper professionals have this short time to reinforce these mothers, trying to enhance their positive self-esteem, develop their self-confidence and life-skills for survival and coping better. Parallely with financial problems and hopelessness, every mother suffer from one or more serious problems e.g. lonely parenting, unemployment, child or partner disability, divorce, abortion, substance abuse, codependency, abusive relationship, depression or other mental health issues. Therefore this bibliotherapy group was led in cotherapy with a psychologist, female director of the institution who had detailed information about mothers' crisis situation, so she could support the bibliotherapist in focus planning and in following participants's further needs. In this group we didn't apply any writing task as participants' average communication skill level was poor. I supposed that every task similar to their failures at school might result frustrating experience and not a positive motivation. Once I asked one of them to write and she rejected it. Given she was pregnant during the group process, I suggested her Noémi Szécsi's fiction baby diary to read at home and then write about it. She rejected both tasks even though it was not mandatory to share anything with us. From this case I identified the complex phenomenon of barriers as the crisis of communication. This group had difficulties with reading and writing performance and preferred informal ways of sharing. At the same time it was a great pleasure to see how they enjoyed the bibliotherapist's reading aloud and how actively and creatively they participated in group discussions about the difficulties of motherhood (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2015).

Table 3. Bibliotherapy for mothers in crisis

<i>Topics discussed</i>	<i>Materials</i>
trials and tribulations of parenting, setting of healthy personal boundaries	Dániel Varró: Misi and the discipline (diary)
coping with motherhood, patience, conflict management	Lórin Szabó: Lóci Becomes a Giant (poem)
supportive/destructive relationships, barriers, resilience	Ervin Lázár: The girl closed in a hat (tale)
coping strategies, self-confidence, self-esteem	The wings of Lotilko (folktale)
female life-cycles, female identity, values, emotional heritage, survival, children	István Örkény: How long do trees live? (short story)

Table 4 summarizes the main topics, materials and writing tasks of two fourteen-month-long bibliotherapy group for women, run parallels in a public library, with 6 and 8 middle-class, graduated female participants, all in their young and middle adulthood. Each group had one older member aged 62 and 63. The groups focused on the multiple experience of female identity and personal growth, supporting participants' coping with normative life-crises, improving their resilience, helping them achieving a sense of intimacy and generativity (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2015). These group sessions run once per month, with one facilitator and two hours long discussions. There were some differences in the list of materials and the ordne of readings as the topics discussed were shaped by participants' needs. Creative writings written at home and their sharing in group sessions were essential parts of our identity work. These groups offered a lifelong perspective in character as three-four different female generations were present and shared their personal life-experiences, offering a flourishing context for interpersonal learning, understanding and acceptance.

Table 4. Bibliotherapy for adult women with normative life-crises

<i>Topics discussed</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Creative tasks</i>
current mood and life situations, challenges, expectations	Virág Erdős: Today (poem)	-
female/male role models, marriage/partnership crises, self-esteem, daydreams and desires	Ulitskaya, Ludmila: Sonechka (novel)	writings reflecting on the therapeutic situation (diary, poem)
attachment, separation, loss, reflectivity, self-reflection, self-esteem, self-confidence, primary and secondary bondings	Eszter Szakács: Saudade; Anna T. Szabó: She leaves me (poems)	creative writing: the woman in the mirror who I am...
female identity, construction of femininity, trans identity, sexuality, body	Tibor Noé Kiss: Inkognitó (novel)	entry through feeling cards (Bear Cards)creative writing: my body, my femininity

role models, female identity, femininity, self-esteem, body image	Krisztina Tóth: The Soul is Megabody (short story)	creative writing: milestones of my personal growth-
creativity, independence, freedom, love, loss	Anna T. Szabó: Bird of Noboby (novel)	-
abusive relationships, domestic violence, infertility, sexual dependence	Noémi Kiss: Thin Angels (novel)	-
taboos, secrets, insight, trust, sharing	Tímea Turi: Things we never talk about (poem)	entry through feeling cards (Bear Cards)
women roles, touchstone members of the family, conscious and unconscious, trauma	Ulitskaya, Ludmila: Medea and her children (novel); Women's Lies (short stories)	-
reading, writing and identity work, mother-daughter relationship, motherhood, lesbian identity	Winterson, Jeanette: Why be happy when you could be normal? (novel)	send your favorite tale to group members, guess choice motivations
self-assessment, personal growth, further developmental tasks	János Szentmártoni: Unterminable poem about ourselves; Szilárd Borbély: If it's time to go (poems)	creative writing: finish the poem with self-reflection, share with others

The last type of bibliotherapy groups for women completed a three-month-long programme for elderly, organised twice for the senior students of the Senior Academy at the University of Pécs. Each group run with 7-10 middle-class, graduated participants, all very active physically and mentally, having no dementia, aged 63-83, plus two younger members aged 47 and 53. Group sessions were held every second week with 1,5-2 hours long discussions, in cotherapy (a bibliotherapist and a mental health worker). The focus of the group was participants' emotional support through the identification and completion process of the developmental tasks of late adulthood, leading toward the achievement of a sense of Ego integrity and competent ageing. In these groups creative writing and contemporary poetry were of great importance and popularity. The love of contemporary poetry might result from participants' curiosity and intellectual needs, in addition, the encounters with contemporary literature introduced them in an unknown, surprisingly reach and up-to-date cultural context which helped them to feel alive. As for their special interest in creative writing, it was clear that it is a good tool to stimulate their creative powers and strengthen the experience of living and ageing competently. Thanks to the special power of reflective writing, participants had the opportunity to reflect continually on their life-experience as a whole. After bibliotherapy sessions they wrote a lot at home even it was not a mandatory task, working actively on their self-assessment, on the

understanding and integration of their life narrative. In every session it was necessary to dedicate time for the sharing and discussion of these writings, sometimes instead of the text chosen by the facilitators. It was not a problem because according to the person-centered concept of bibliotherapy, and from the viewpoint of identity work tools, participants' creative writings are considered as valuable as literature. The main topics (e.g. female identity, maternity, ageing, generational conflicts, love, sexuality, loss) were similar to those we have discussed in the library-sponsored group for women with normative life-crises. We used some texts from that repertoire (e.g. Virág Erdős: *Today*, János Szentmártoni: *Unterminable* poem about ourselves), but we skipped the novels, and substituted them for the participants' creative writings. New texts (for instance Tibor Déry: *Love*, Dezső Kosztolányi: *Tarn*, Zsuzsa Mirtse: *Eve Faces*, Anna T. Szabó: *February*) were strongly related to the typical life-experiences of late adulthood such as grandparenthood, death and loss in close relationships, active ageing, challenges of love, sexuality and renewal in late adulthood (Béres & Zoboki, 2015).

Concluding it is worth to overview some of the main benefits of bibliotherapy for women. The group facilitator usually asks participants to fill out a final feedback questionnaire which helps participants' reflection on the most important factors of their therapeutic experience. According to participants' opinion:

- They usually appreciated the non-directive facilitation and the support of our personal and interactive environment where we all were interested in their personal opinion, feelings and life-experience.
- The group supported them with the „sense of universality“. They felt they are not alone suffering from the certain problems, and they learnt how others solve similar problems.
- The group supported the deeper understanding of other generations and persons with different ways of thinking, their motivations and reasons behind their communication and behavior.
- The group supported the deeper understanding of themselves (weaknesses, strengths) and fostered the realisation of further developmental tasks.
- The group created a warm, positive and supportive emotional atmosphere for women who are often lacking this basic „holding“ in their average relationships.

As outlined previously, the presented bibliotherapy programmes affected a number of emotional and cognitive changes, empowering women through their whole life-span.

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