

BIBLIOTHERAPY IN SOCIAL WORK: CAN A GUIDED READING IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF CLIENTS?*

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Abstract. This article describes a specific therapeutic method used by helping professionals, librarians, and others to address various issues and needs of their service users. The guided therapeutic use of selected books, including audiobooks, stories, different genres of imaginative literature as an adjunct to intervention is applicable in all stages of life and with a variety of population groups and problems they have. The authors present definitions of the key terms and brief history of the development of bibliotherapy, based on literature review, as well as set out the applicability of bibliotherapy in health care and social work practice. It is an attempt to integrate social work, professional librarianship, health care, and bibliotherapy in this article.

Key words: *bibliotherapy, helping professions, social work, cultural competence*

ԲԻԲԼԻՈԹԵՐԱՊԻԱՆ ՍՈՑԻԱԼԱԿԱՆ ԱՇԽԱՏԱՆՔՈՒՄ. ԿԱՐՈՂ Է ՈՒՂՂՈՐԴՎԱԾ ԸՆԹԵՐՑԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԲԱՐԵԼԱՎԵԼ ՇԱՀԱՌՈՒԻ ԿՅԱՆՔԻ ՈՐԱԿՆ ՈՒ ՍՈՑԻԱԼԱԿԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԱՌՆՈՒՄԸ

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Ամփոփում: Սույն հոդվածում ներկայացվում է առանձնահատուկ թերապևտիկ մեթոդ, որը կիրառվում է օգնող մասնագետների, գրադարանավարների և այլ մասնագետների կողմից՝ նրանց ծառայություններից օգտվողների կարիքներին ու զանազան հիմնախնդիրներին արձագանքելու նպատակով: Ընտրված գրքերի, ներառյալ աուդիոգրքերի, պատմվածքների, տարբեր ժանրերի գեղարվեստական գրականության ուղղորդված թերապևտիկ օգտագործումը

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որպես միջամտության լրացուցիչ գործիք կիրառելի է կյանքի բոլոր փուլերում և տարբեր սոցիալական խմբերի ու նրանց ունեցած հիմնախնդիրների հետ աշխատանքում: Հեղինակները ներկայացնում են բանալի եզրույթների սահմանումները և բիրլիոթերապիայի զարգացման համառոտ պատմական ակնարկը՝ հիմնված գրականության ուսումնասիրության վրա, ինչպես նաև անդրադառնում են առողջապահության ոլորտում ու սոցիալական աշխատանքի պրակտիկայում բիրլիոթերապիայի կիրառելիության հարցին: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում ցույց տալու սոցիալական աշխատանքի, պրոֆեսիոնալ գրադարանավարության, առողջապահության ոլորտի և բիրլիոթերապիայի միջև կապը:

Բանալի բառեր – *բիրլիոթերապիա, օգնող մասնագիտություններ, սոցիալական աշխատանք, մշակութային իրավասություն*

БИБЛИОТЕРАПИЯ В СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ РАБОТЕ: МОЖЕТ ЛИ НАПРАВЛЕННОЕ ЧТЕНИЕ УЛУЧШИТЬ КАЧЕСТВО ЖИЗНИ И СОЦИАЛЬНОЕ ФУНКЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ КЛИЕНТОВ?

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Аннотация. В данной статье описывается специфический терапевтический метод, используемый помогающими специалистами, библиотекарями и другими специалистами для решения различных проблем и потребностей пользователей их услуг. Направленное терапевтическое использование избранных книг, включая аудиокниги, рассказы, различные жанры художественной литературы, в качестве дополнения к вмешательству применимо на всех этапах жизни и с различными группами населения и имеющимися у них проблемами. На основе обзора литературы авторы представляют определения основных терминов и краткую историю развития библиотерапии, а также излагают возможности применения библиотерапии в сфере здравоохранения и практике социальной работы. В статье предпринята попытка показать связь социальной работы, профессионального библиотечного дела, здравоохранения и библиотерапии.

Ключевые слова: *библиотерапия, помогающие профессии, социальная работа, культурная компетентность*

THE EMERGENCE OF BIBLIOTHERAPY

The phenomenon of books with healing influence on a reader is not a new one. For instance, in the ancient Egyptian library of Pharaoh Ramses II the inscription “the house of healing for the soul” was discovered. (Lutz, 1978) As a recognized specific method of expressive therapeutic intervention bibliotherapy appeared in the middle of previous century. In 1916 American writer Samuel

Crozier in some sense has mentioned this therapeutic method writing about “bibliopathic institution” in his article in a scientific magazine (Dovey, 2015). Even earlier, since the beginning of nineteenth century Benjamin Rush, Sigmund Freud and later his daughter Anna Freud had some contribution in this area by mentioning the role of librarians in a hospital. According to American library consultant and author of “Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice” (1978) Rhea Rubin, the first known case of someone using books in treatment of patients with mental health issues was a librarian who applied it in 1904 at one of the hospitals in Massachusetts. Later, in 1939, bibliotherapy was officially recognized among librarians when the hospital division of the American Library Association appointed its first bibliotherapy committee (Whiting, 2020).

In parallel, during the opening years of twentieth century first social work positions were established in hospitals in the US. The very first British social-service workers in hospitals/almoners appeared in the end of nineteenth century, and the pioneer was Mary Stewart (Lynsey, 2012), who had an experience of working and being trained as a social-service worker at the Charity Organization Society. She was hired by the Royal Free Hospital which offered free medical treatment to patients from disadvantaged social groups and with low socioeconomic status. Thus, she is known as the first female almoner/medical social worker in Britain. In the US it has started since 1902, when Dr. P. Charles from John Hopkins University sent the medical staff to have home visits and assess social factors influencing patients’ diseases (Covert, 1917). Later, in 1905 a physician Richard Cabot from the Massachusetts General Hospital appointed a trained nurse Garnet Isabel Pelton to fill the first social worker position and provide social work services in the outpatient⁵⁶ department of the hospital.

A year later Dr. Cabot hired Ida Maude Cannon to jointly organize the nation's first hospital-based social work program in the US. Cannon was enrolled in the Boston School for Social Work and upon her graduation in 1907 she became a full-time staff member of the Cabot's team and, thus, a pioneer in hospital social work (Massachusetts GH, 2023). At the same time in 1907 social work position was placed in the Neurology Clinic of the Massachusetts Hospital, and this might be considered as the beginning of social work in mental health, although there was no clear evidence of having distinction between medical and psychiatric social work practices at that time. Psychiatric social work in the US began in the early twentieth century “as a result of a movement for community care of the mentally ill”, when psychiatrists became more involved in the control and prevention of mental illness in the community (Stuart, 1997). Soon after the very first social worker position in the hospital was established, in about eight years similar positions were established in 100 US hospitals, and by

⁵⁶ Outpatient is “a person who goes to a hospital for treatment, but who does not stay any nights there.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/outpatient>

1923 already 400 hospitals had hired social workers (Cowles, 2003), which shows the rich practice and roots of social work in the health field.

While such prominent scientists as Rush and Freud were referring to the role of librarians in a hospital, Dr. Cabot was talking about social workers' role in the health field, particularly in his speech at the International Conference of Social Work in Paris in 1928. He talked about social work's importance in hospitals and "agreed that a primary function of hospital social work was to teach doctors and nurses about the social and psychological aspects of disease" (Cowles, 2003). This means that treatment and curative intervention requires not only medical staff (physicians and nurses) to be engaged but also some other professionals, including social workers.

Nowadays bibliotherapy is a widely spread therapeutic tool used by professionals in hospitals and other health care settings, and articles on this method of expressive therapeutic intervention have to be submitted in medical scientific magazines for many years now (Jackson, 2016).

The possible applicability of bibliotherapy within a psychological model of therapeutic intervention was first discussed in the 1950s by Carolyn Shrodes, who is known as a "mother of bibliotherapy". According to her definition, bibliotherapy is a process of dynamic interaction between literature and the personality of a reader which is guided by a qualified or trained professional (Das, 2021.) In 1966 bibliotherapy officially appeared in the medical dictionary, where it was described as the process of using literature to promote cognitive change (Gepp, 2022).

Nowadays bibliotherapy can be described as a technique which is applied by a trained specialist to make therapeutic processes more interactive and promote achieving of preventive, rehabilitative or developmental goals. The selected literature can be in various formats and genres. Needs of the target group or individual, age and developmental characteristics, as well as the peculiarities of the situation or problem should be taken into account. Modern information technologies can ensure the variety of professional intervention arsenal in this regard. The material used by a practitioner can be printed or didactic or in any other format; but, while using IT, specialists should always remember about the possible so-called digital gap among their service users. Particularly, social workers have to pay attention if their service users have a lack of computer skills, not enough knowledge and skills to use a smartphone or similar devices, as well as if they have fear of technology and cannot use those devices because of that fear and uncertainty.

Bibliotherapy should be part of modern social work practice as an additional tool that can be used during casework or groupwork with representatives of different age groups. Social work professional Janet Barlow, for example, has used bibliotherapy in her professional practice regardless of the age of her service users. In her opinion, "since reading and storytelling are universal, these activities can be

used across the developmental spectrum (Jackson, 2016).

There is a variety of problems which can be effectively addressed by using bibliotherapy along with other intervention methods and tools. It can be applied in case of depression, aggression, addictions, nightmares, homelessness, adoption, loss and grief, etc. Bibliotherapy can lead to insights or help to see alternatives in terms of possible solutions.

According to a study conducted several years ago by Hazlett-Stevens and Yelena Oren among college students, a 10-weeks course of "mindfulness-based stress reduction" bibliotherapy reduced the level of anxiety and stress and contributed to an increase in the quality of life of those students (Hazlett-Stevens et al., 2016).

As the researchers Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson and Paula McMillan stated, bibliotherapy can result in increased self-awareness, clarification of values, development of client's ethnic identity, lead to improved coping mechanisms and more constructive attitude to problems, reduce deconstructive reactions and emotions (Sherman, 2017). It can enhance client's self-esteem and promote personal growth. While for social workers, practicing bibliotherapy can promote more empathy and understanding of others as well as enhance cultural competence⁵⁷ of a practitioner. Acquiring this type of competence requires self-awareness and life-long learning, and reading plays a huge role in this regard. Bibliotherapy and cultural competence in social work are interconnected in some sense, as practicing bibliotherapy can help to discover and understand new cultures, and as a result, accept and appreciate cultural diversity which is an inseparable part of social work practice.

Thus, bibliotherapy is an important tool that can be effectively applied by various professionals such as psychologists or psychiatrists, as well as social workers and librarians. It is extremely important in what conditions, emotions and state of mind a person is in while reading literature. It is a fact that texts can have a great impact on emotions and thoughts. The text can educate and socialize as it reflects the cultural codes of a particular society. For instance, an important part of parenting is to teach a child something through text, particularly stories, fairy tales, etc. Such texts are the cultural codes existing in any society. When problems related to mental health and mental well-being arise, and stress factors have their negative impact, especially in crisis situations such as war or pandemic, sometimes words and texts can have a therapeutic effect. That is why the use of carefully selected literature with such an effect is called bibliotherapy.

Trying to define bibliotherapy, a social worker and a poetry therapist Wendy Kaplan refers to the definition of the American Poetry Therapy Association: bibliotherapy is a healing process of promoting human development through spoken

⁵⁷ "Cultural competence refers to social workers' ability to identify their own affiliations to culture and recognize and respect differing traditions of culture in others in ways that influence styles of communication and expressions of respect."
<https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=7dVckZAYUm%3D&portalid=0>

and written language, symbol or story. As she pointed out, “bibliotherapy evolved from a library science tradition of prescribing books for particular concerns. It includes the use of literature of all kinds, including poetry, book passages, quotations, songs, storytelling, even segments of movies and video to help a person focus on what personal meaning it holds for them” (Jackson, 2016).

TYPES OF BIBLIOTHERAPY

At an early stage (1970s) bibliotherapy had 3 main types - institutional, clinical and developmental.

Table 1. The comparison of institutional, clinical and developmental bibliotherapy (Rubin, 1978)

Character istic	Institutional	Clinical	Developmental
Format	individual or group (usually passive)	group (active), can be voluntary or involuntary	group (active), always voluntary
Client	patient, prisoner or client in private practice	person with emotional and behavioral problem	ordinary person in a tough/crisis situation
Therapist	physician and librarian	physician, librarian in consultation or mental health worker	Librarian, teacher or other
Material	usually didactic	imaginative literature	imaginative literature and/or didactic
Technique	discussion of material	discussion with emphasis on reactions and insights	discussion with emphasis on reactions and insights
Setting	institution or private practice	institution, private practice or community	community
Goal	informational, with some insight	insight and/or behavioral change	development and self-actualization

In modern practices bibliotherapy has various types and can be used with several goals. It can be developmental, creative, prescriptive or therapeutic. Developmental bibliotherapy is used to explain childhood and adolescent issues. Creative bibliotherapy is usually used in a group therapy, where group members read and discuss stories, poems, and fiction. Prescriptive bibliotherapy uses self-help books to help in work with thought patterns, feelings, and actions. Therapeutic bibliography is used in combination with other types of therapy to manage psychological issues (Lindberg, 2021).

As it was mentioned earlier, not only psychologists use bibliotherapy as an expressive therapeutic tool, but also some other helping professionals can apply it

in their practice, including social workers. “Helping professions” is an umbrella expression to describe all those professions which provide health and education services to their service users. Egan’s term “helping” is used in a more generic sense to include those professionals who provide counselling and use helping skills in their professional practice (Westergaard, 2016). Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, occupation therapists, sexologists, advocates, mentors or teachers, and similar professionals can be considered under the “helping professions” umbrella.

Using bibliotherapy in social work requires appropriate training, which will allow a professional to have better understanding of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic tool and gain complimentary knowledge and skills to apply it effectively by choosing the correct literature corresponding to a specific problem. It should include basic knowledge on bibliotherapy, based on related scientific literature and researches, discussion of problems and cases when this tool of intervention can be effective, as well as develop the techniques of a book selection and application in bibliotherapy, and present a list of books which are already effectively used by helping professionals in various areas. Suggesting a book which was appropriate in an old paradigm, but now it is kind of anachronism, can harm. A reader can get things wrong by applying inappropriate literature. For example, if parents of a child with disability try to understand the causes of disability by themselves and read an old literature with outdated information, instead of finding an answer and healing they can feel guilty or come up with wrong conclusions. A book selection is of a key importance.

The international experience of using bibliotherapy in social work shows that it is especially effective in case of divorce, family crisis, problems related to parenting, adoption or foster care, addictions, EOL (end of life) illnesses and palliative care (Pardeck, 1998). Studies proved, that bibliotherapy is beneficial to patients with cancer (Malibiran et al., 2018). For instance, in work with cancer patients, especially when there is shock, anxiety, fear of death or similar feelings associated with accepting the diagnosis, bibliotherapy along with other therapeutic processes can have a positive influence and be an effective intervention tool. Since the field of palliative care involves complex needs and requires a multidisciplinary team intervention, including the services of a social worker, the practice of using bibliotherapy can also be part of social worker’s job in palliative and hospice care. Social workers can be expected to find literature that is suitable and best meets the patient's needs, for example, to provide literature in Braille or audiobooks for a patient with sight issues. It is a well-known fact, that social workers play a significant role in hospice and palliative care in many countries. They are usually part of palliative care teams, working closely with doctors, nurses, psychologists and other professionals. The competencies of a social worker in this field include not only professional knowledge and skills, but also values, capabilities, and

complementary field-specific knowledge.

Many studies have been conducted in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s in order to identify the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in terms of responding to various problems and needs of people in need of therapy. A meta-analysis of approximately seventy studies conducted by Marrs in 1995 found that bibliotherapy was most successfully applied in work with elderly, adult patients and clients with high anxiety and depression (Lichtsinn, 2013). There are some researches and practices that also prove its high effectiveness in working with children (Adler & Foster, 1997; Shechtman, 1999; Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010; et al.). Particularly, creative bibliotherapy was found effective in working with 5-16 years old children who have behavioral disorders, high anxiety, ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), depression, aggression or similar problems (Momtgomery et al., 2015). Developmental bibliotherapy, for example, is definitely applicable in work with children facing developmental issues. It supports discussions between a children and therapists concerning their needs and has a positive influence on their mental health and development in general.

The use of bibliotherapy in therapeutic work with sexually abused children is not very widespread, but it can be considered a successful practice. Storytelling is especially effective and comforting in working with a child who has experienced psychological trauma. Bibliotherapy can have some advantages in the sense that instead of destructive feelings and coping mechanisms it develops healing skills, it can play essential role in helping children to cope with problems and overcome challenges. According to Pardek, a child, who has been sexually abused, can learn new things, begin the healing process through stories, texts that show how the personages in those stories overcome their problems in more constructive forms. (Wohl et al., 2019) In this field social workers play an essential role. Thus, bibliotherapy can also be successfully applied in child protection system and social work with children and youth.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COLABORATION BETWEEN HELPING PROFESSIONALS AND LIBRARIANS

There are some good examples of successful cooperation between a librarian and a therapist over the years, which resulted in scientific collaboration, joint studies and articles, as well as carefully selected lists of books applicable in bibliotherapy. One of those examples is cooperation between a counsellor Dr. Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson and a librarian Paula McMillan, who are coauthors of the “Competent Bibliotherapy: Preparing Counselors to Use Literature with Culturally Diverse Clients” published in 2006.

Back in 1965, the head of the occupational therapy department of the Denver State Hospital and the library staff member of that hospital, medical librarian and

supervisor Helen Elser started together bibliotherapeutic sessions at the library. They decided that the existing material, used in bibliotherapy with mental health patients, needs to be revised, updated, and the hospital should have own resources for bibliotherapy. The material which used to be applied before was not appropriate in many cases, sometimes it was large enough and not effective due to intellectual and emotional capabilities of patients. Many of patients in mental health had limited ability to concentrate attention, that is why bibliotherapeutic material had to be small size. They successfully applied short stories, poems and had evidence that brief material works much better in bibliotherapy with these patients. Literature used by them (“The Road not Taken” and “Lodger” by Robert Frost, “I’m Nobody, Who are You” by Emily Dickinson) was simple, easy to understand, evoking various interpretations, feelings and emotions that coincided with what patients feel. Unfortunately, there was a common practice in mental health settings to give patients diagnostic labels while staying at a hospital. As labeling and stigmatization used to be a part of the institutionalization in mental health, it was urgent to change such practices (Elser, 1982). Bibliotherapists can play an important role in this process of changing this unacceptable tradition and building new quality of relationships between a patient and staff.

Kaplan recommends social workers to discover bibliotherapy and apply it in their professional lives more. She defines bibliotherapy as a user-friendly method that can be applied in casework, as well as in work with couples, families, and groups, it enriches the social worker as a specialist, makes professional work more alive, interactive, and has a wide spectrum of application (Jackson, 2016).

In order to apply bibliotherapy professionally, competently and effectively, as well as to overcome possible limitations and avoid an unsuccessful process, therapists must have special training and be familiar with the appropriate lists of bibliotherapeutic books.

Despite the fact that bibliotherapy has been a widely used method of intervention in a number of professions for decades, including psychiatry and psychology, in social work practice bibliotherapy was underestimated, in some countries it was not considered as widely used method of intervention or an adjunct intervention tool which can be applied in practice along with other professional methods. However, bibliotherapy can be successfully applied in child protection field, in schools, hospitals or hospices, in social work with families or elderly people, etc. Although it came to social work later than it appeared in other professions, nowadays social workers also apply bibliotherapy in casework or groupwork and consider it as an innovative and effective approach in working with their service users.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.