

How do Existential Psychotherapists Experience the Use of Bibliotherapy with Clients?

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Abstract

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to facilitate the psychotherapeutic process and therapeutic reading is often used as an adjunct to various psychotherapy modalities. This paper presents a talk reporting on the initial findings of the use of bibliotherapy in existential psychotherapy, as three existential-phenomenological therapists have experienced it.

Key Words

Bibliotherapy, existential, phenomenological, psychotherapy

Introduction

This paper is based on a talk given as part of a symposium delivered at the Third World Congress of Existential Therapy in Athens, Greece, on 4 May 2023. The symposium's title was 'Walking the walk: What does it mean to read, write, teach and practice existentially and phenomenologically?'. The session was convened by Simon du Plock, who presented alongside Martin Adams their research with Rosemary Lodge on what it means to teach and write existentially (see pp236-257), Chris Cleave's work on what it means to read existentially (see pp286-300), and my work on how existential therapists experience the use of bibliotherapy with clients. The presentation aimed to demonstrate how the four activities of reading, writing, teaching and therapy come together in an existentially informed bibliotherapy and how this can be used to change lives.

My talk consisted of my initial findings on the use of bibliotherapy in existential psychotherapy, as three existential-phenomenological therapists have experienced it. My research aims to explore the use of bibliotherapy by existential psychotherapists who consider therapeutic reading an important adjunct to their way of working. Specifically, I am concerned with how existential psychotherapists experience bibliotherapy with clients. However, I would like to begin by first considering some background on bibliotherapy and why it is important in the context of existential psychotherapy.

Bibliotherapy: Background and history

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to facilitate the psychotherapeutic process and is often used as an adjunct to various psychotherapy modalities. It has been defined as “a program of selected activity involving reading materials which is planned, conducted, and controlled under the guidance of a [practitioner]” as part of treatment for patients (Favazza, 1966: 138). The *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines bibliotherapy as “any form of psychotherapy in which the reading of prescribed texts forms an important part of the therapeutic process” (Colman, 2006).

The term ‘bibliotherapy’ first appeared in 1916 (Crothers, 1916; Rubin & Neal-Schuman, 1978: xi). However, the psychotherapeutic utilisation of books extends to the ancient world, as noted by du Plock (2005: 14): “[t]he therapeutic potential of literature...has probably been known since the beginning of written communication”. According to Rubin & Neal-Schuman (1978: 3), “[t]he first published article ‘On reading, recreation and amusements for the insane’ appeared in 1853, although most researchers only date bibliotherapy literature back to the First World War when the term ‘bibliotherapy’ was coined”. The use of bibliotherapy has continued to increase since World War I and throughout the twentieth century. By the Forties and Fifties, there were more than four hundred published journal articles (ibid). During that time, one prominent medical doctor, Dr Louis H. Twyeffort (1940), defined bibliotherapy as “an aid to treatment which aims at the acquisition, through reading, of a fuller and better knowledge of oneself and one’s reactions, resulting in a better adjustment to life. It also connotes the relief of suffering by the psychological process induced by reading” (cited in Rubin & Neal-Schuman, 1978: 4-5), a definition which feels just as apt today.

Initially, specialised librarians undertook early prescriptions of books, with the use of literature for therapy broadening and evolving over time. Indeed, the importance of bibliotherapy cannot be underscored, as noted by Pomeroy (1978: 11): “[T]he effect of the printed page is far-reaching – how far, it is impossible to measure in any satisfactory way.” Therefore, understanding the nuances and experience of bibliotherapeutic reading could not be a more relevant endeavour.

Bibliotherapy: Therapeutic functions

Bibliotherapy is based on the basic idea that literature has therapeutic properties; indeed, the term comes from the Greek *biblion* (book) and *oepatteid* (healing) (Rubin & Neal-Schuman, 1978). As noted by du Plock (2005: 13), “[t]he question ‘why’ humans are literature-producing and literature-consuming animals is at the heart a psychological one”. Indeed, the evolution of narrative and its place and purpose in what it means to be human continues to metamorphise. Our brains are pre-wired to understand

words and language (Siegel, 1999). The written word allows us to share and communicate, remember our past, and traverse time and space (Clayton, 2019). Thus, by its very nature, reading is also cathartic; it relieves us of our emotions and incites them (du Plock, 2005); functionally, it educates and elucidates simultaneously. Thus it is no wonder that, as noted by Rubin & Neal-Schuman (1978: xi), bibliotherapy has been used “since the Greeks called their libraries pharmacies of ‘medicine for the souls’, and the Romans felt that orations could be read by patients to improve their mental health”.

My own results of conducting a focused literature search in the area revealed considerable published literature on bibliotherapy. However, the searches conducted evidenced a dearth of literature contributing to the existential-phenomenological field and psychotherapeutic practice. My aim in conducting research in this area is to add to the field by demonstrating how existential-phenomenological therapists can engage with bibliotherapy meaningfully with their clients. In accordance with du Plock (2016: 85), this work will assist in devising “ways in which to bring these aspects of therapeutic practice more fully into focus for the existential-phenomenological therapist community” and demonstrate how bibliotherapy can usefully be used as a beneficial adjunct to their way of working. Moreover, this work will contribute to the dialogue started by du Plock (2006) by adding to the debate in counselling psychology about the benefits of adopting ‘existential bibliotherapy’ into the National Health Service (NHS) (cf. du Plock, 2002). As noted by du Plock (2006), the NHS has adopted the United States form of bibliotherapy, which takes a technical, manualised (self-help) approach (see also du Plock, 2016). In contrast, returning to the phenomenon of clients’ reading and how they use books enables the client and therapist to co-explore, co-create and co-construct meaning; that is, “to provide a way of moving beyond symptom alleviation in order to assist people to engage with problems of living” (du Plock, 2006: 31). My goal is to demonstrate the nature of bibliotherapy in an existential-phenomenological context through the lived experience of the co-investigators of my research.

Third World Congress of Existential Therapy

At the time of writing and presenting at the Congress, my research included the results of three structured interviews between September 2022 and March 2023. The interviews were conducted via online video platforms. Ten questions were developed to form an open-ended/semi-structured interview from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. The interview followed a series of questions, such as: “How did using books in therapy first arise for you?” and “How is your use of bibliotherapy impacted by being grounded in existential-phenomenological practice?”.

Below my talk is presented in full, staying true to the form and content

as presented on the day. My research explores the question: ‘How do existential psychotherapists experience the use of bibliotherapy with clients?’.

I am using Manen’s (2016) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncover thematic aspects of phenomenon from the transcribed texts of participant interviews. Themes emerge from the text, allowing us to see what shines through and what tends to hide itself.

Today, I will be presenting the results of three structured research interviews. Four key themes have emerged from the thematic analysis:

1. Identification with bibliotherapy
2. Extension of therapy
3. Benefits of bibliotherapy
4. Meaning-making through literature

I will talk about each of these individually, illustrating them through anecdotes that will function as examples describing the phenomenon, making what is unexplainable knowable in a phenomenological sense.

1. Identification with bibliotherapy

The first theme to emerge was that the therapists did not identify with using bibliotherapy. Participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be using bibliotherapy. Although all identified as using books in therapy, they did not identify or consider themselves to be using bibliotherapy:

- I’ve never really thought about it too much. I probably wouldn’t have said that. Certainly, bibliotherapy would never have been a term that I would have used at all.
- I’ve always been interested in it, but I have never received any official training in it. So I would not describe myself as doing this.
- Labels, I don’t like labels. I’m very much phenomenological and existential at the root. But you know, I may fall into this label, maybe I’m unconsciously using it.

Despite a lack of conscious identification, it emerged that books formed an essential part of their way of working:

- I suggest reading from a list of recommended books that have been really successful with clients.
- I have two different sets of books, I have more professional therapeutic books for mental health workers, and I have more daily books reserved for my average Joe and every Jane kind of regular public clients.
- I go with a client if they are open. Sometimes they openly ask me “Do

you recommend any reading?” And we have a chat about it. “What is it that you need or want to read about? How could this be helpful?” And then, after having this chat, I may recommend something.

2. Extension of therapy

The second theme to emerge was that bibliotherapy was seen as an extension of therapy, something that happens both inside and outside the room, connecting the therapist and client together. Participants were asked what the function of bibliotherapy was for them:

- It’s an extension of therapy. It bridges two sessions, so they are not alone with themselves.
- It’s another kind of stream to the work. It’s almost like a second dialogue between the client and I.
- It helps connect with clients on a different level. It’s like a door to further exploration.

Books extend therapy by co-creating a safe dimension where the therapist and client can meet. They work like a tether connecting them both to the phenomenon being considered.

3. Benefits of bibliotherapy

The third theme to emerge was that there are specific benefits of using bibliotherapy as an adjunct to therapy. Participants were asked how they use bibliotherapy in clinical practice, such as how they decide what texts to recommend and how they engage with it:

- I’ve seen pretty profound shifts in a client’s negative cognitions.
- It provides a better chance of communicating and a better chance of exploring the client’s experience.
- It draws us closer because we share something, what I thought of the book. So it’s a safe space. I am making a disclosure, but I am not. The disclosure is about the impact something had on me, about something external, and not about my private life. Clients really value talking about books. They realise, the therapist is human, it’s a normal relationship.

Books allow the therapist to be seen by the client and for them to meet in a safe space or dimension where they can understand each other.

4. Meaning-making through literature

The fourth theme to emerge is that working with books in therapy is an organic meaning-making process. Participants were asked how they have

experienced the impact of bibliotherapy on their relationship with clients:

- I think it's human beings meaning-making as we are. If you've made a suggestion to read something and a client comes back, and there's an element of shared understanding, or it's been helpful, or it's moved them, there's a real shift. Not just in their outlook or enlightenment but in the relationship. Their shared understanding or meaning.
- It helps me see them. It helps them see themselves as well. We all colour the things we read. We all have this very personal take. So, I am interested in that personal colour, what that person felt as one was reading the book.
- I always think that understanding is a form of love. To be understood is almost to be held. For some clients, saying: "Oh, read this", is an "I want you to understand me" or "I want to see how you respond and whether you understand the same way or see the world in a similar way". There are different stages of meaning-making.

Overall, the results indicated that the how of bibliotherapy for these therapists was most often as recommended reading that was client directed.

On occasion, prescriptions were noted for clients requiring texts to address specific existential issues or themes, such as meaninglessness (e.g. *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1963)). Or engulfment or ontological issues (e.g. *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1969)).

The use of technical books was mentioned for use with mental health practitioners (e.g. *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (Wallin, 2007)).

Novels for the general public, and existential or philosophical texts (e.g. *Existential Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1980)) for those more intellectually inclined.

Also, more rarely, the use of workbooks, worksheets and exercise books was mentioned for clients presenting with specific problems, such as alcoholism and eating disorders.

The what of bibliotherapy included using it to increase communication, connection or rapport with the client, and understanding of each other. Books were described as a way of facilitating a therapeutic shift when a client is stuck. And as a jumping board or platform to exploring their experience through the voice or story provided by an author. Books were also described as a means of opening up a second dialogue or dimension, another level of communication that is external to both client and therapist but at the same time shared.

Finally, the why of bibliotherapy included that it helps clients find the words to describe what they are going through. Books can be beneficial in providing information or psychoeducation to clients about specific concerns. Books have the ability to speed up the therapeutic process by extending therapy outside the room. Enabling continued learning and

exploration outside of the session.

Most importantly, books create a safe space for discussion of important themes by taking the focus off of the client and onto an externalised phenomenon created by an author that opens up exploration through metaphors that can then be safely brought back to the client.

Overall, the lived experience of using bibliotherapy by existential-phenomenological therapists was described as being like a triangulation point or tether in the room to something external but shared that enables both client and therapist to explore important themes in a safe space. Also, the therapists described feeling like books come alive in the room and allow us to both see and reveal ourselves to others.

Stories were seen as powerful metaphors of life that have the capacity to draw us closer, facilitate communication, and create shared meaning-making experiences. However, they were also seen as having the capacity to push us apart, expose our inner worlds, and challenge us in unexpected ways.

Conclusion

The idea that the written word has therapeutic properties has existed for thousands of years. This research is part of a larger body of work that aims to expand our understanding of the use of therapeutic reading by existential-phenomenological practitioners and to demonstrate how it can be used as a beneficial adjunct to their way of working. Thus far, through engaging in a co-created meaning-making process, this research has facilitated the emergence of the co-investigators reporting a felt sense of discovering aspects of themselves that were previously unknowable. Books were described as coming alive in the room and creating a safe space between the therapist and client; something within and between. Like a tether away from the client and onto the externalised phenomenon, which allows “that which gives itself show itself” (Manen, 2016: 221).

Finally, books were described as allowing therapists to be seen by clients and for them to meet each other and understand one another. Indeed, books act “almost like a mirror...looking into it and seeing something about themselves in it”, which enables therapists to see and understand in return. Furthermore, books were seen as being able to highlight something phenomenological happening in the room between therapist and client that was hidden or did not emerge without the tension or togetherness that was brought through the therapeutic reading; books are a triangulation point between therapist and client that provide a naturally emerging hermeneutic circle of interpretation (ibid).

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