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Bibliotherapy. A "new" service for Libraries

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Abstract:

Purpose - The present research aims to investigate the nature and characteristics of bibliotherapy, as they have been formulated in experts' opinions related to the specific topic. The research aimed to set a general framework and to examine the relationship between bibliotherapy and librarians.

Design / methodology / approach - The generic purposive sampling technique was used to investigate the topic. Six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview data were analyzed, and 5 distinct categories emerged.

Findings - Participants believe that books can be used to treat psychological problems and difficulties and improve the quality of life of individuals. Thus, bibliotherapy can be viewed as an opportunity for libraries to strengthen their position in modern societies and offer new, relevant services.

Originality / value - The paper presents the views of six experts (three from Greece, one from Italy and two from the UK). Two of them were approached due to their direct professional involvement with bibliotherapy. The remaining participants are connected in various ways to books and reading and have a good insight into the therapeutic potential of books.

Index Terms - Bibliotherapy, Book therapy, Greek libraries, Mental health, Psychological well-being

I. INTRODUCTION

Bibliotherapy can be described as the use of reading to change the way people act or behave [1]. As stated in the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science, Bibliotherapy is defined as the "use of books selected based on content in a scheduled reading project, planned to facilitate the recovery of patients who have a mental illness or emotional disorder" [2] It has also been described by book therapists Berthoud and Elderkin in their famous book *Novel Cure* (2013) as "prescribing fiction for life's illnesses" [3]. Undoubtedly, bibliotherapy remedies are not limited to fiction, as self-help books are also widely used in several

bibliotherapy programs worldwide. However, the use of literature is considered "the purest and best form of bibliotherapy" [4, p. 54].

In the history of bibliotherapy, books have been used to strengthen emotional skills or as a problem-solving tool, with different names depending on time and place [5]. Although this practice has received increasing attention in recent years, the term "bibliotherapy" was first introduced a century ago. In contrast, the underlying belief that books can offer therapeutic benefits to readers dates back to antiquity. As early as 1939, the Association of Hospital and Institution Libraries, then a division of the American Library Association (ALA) [6], commissioned a study of this therapeutic method, and thus bibliotherapy was officially associated with librarianship. Notwithstanding its healing potential and apparent connection to books and libraries, bibliotherapy has not gained a clear position in libraries [7].

II. BIBLIOTHERAPY AND LIBRARIES

In the digital age, libraries faced with the challenge of staying relevant have overly focused on "technological offerings, virtual holdings, and remote interactions" [8, p.197]. However, as custodians of written cultural heritage and key disseminators of information and knowledge, they cannot abandon their social role, which is a basic part of their *raison d'être*. Thus, new library roles and relevant user services are being sought. In this context, the promotion of the love of reading, which has been underestimated in recent years, seems to be regaining ground. Moreover, activities like bibliotherapy constitute a first-class opportunity for libraries to strengthen their position in modern societies. Studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of reading on one's mental health and quality of life. Engaging with books has been shown to alleviate stress and anxiety, foster increased empathy, and enhance overall well-being [9]. As a result, libraries can be a crucial source of support for individuals looking to improve their mental health through reading and other resources [10].

Unquestionably bibliotherapy and the library have something so common that it can hardly be overlooked. What exactly will be the library's role is an issue to be investigated as there are different service models around the world. Considering the various relevant library programs, we conclude that the library can play a dual role:

1. as the place in which people can get prescribed books;

2. as an area that cultivates the love of reading, organizing dedicated reading clubs or groups.

In both cases, its role as an information provider remains strong. An organized and active library and, even more, a network of libraries can be a valuable infrastructure for all types of social action and, of course, for bibliotherapy programs. Since libraries promote reading for educational and entertainment purposes, bibliotherapy adds the therapeutic dimension and becomes relevant to the purposes of 21st-century librarianship. The IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) website hosts a long list of articles on the impact of libraries on the well-being of children and young adults. These include articles on library bibliotherapy projects where it is noted that "as all librarians know, reading improves skills like empathy, emotion detection and perseverance" as well as that "continuing education keeps professional librarians informed about child and youth development [11].

The various forms that bibliotherapy can take are inferred from the various definitions available. Specifically, it can be classified as follows [12]:

- *Creative Bibliotherapy*: Refers to using fiction and poetry in an official schema to improve mental health. It generally adopts the group therapy approach to ensure the efficient use of time and resources. Creative bibliotherapy groups operate in the form of a traditional reading group, under the reading model standard guided by a trained mediator, or in a combination of both, focusing on literature and sometimes poetry. Some creative literature programs focus on a particular list of books, while others highlight the diversity of readership preferences. Social interaction and group dynamics are also important aspects of the whole effort.

- *Informal Bibliotherapy*: It refers to the exploitation of readers' daily reading ability and the experience of librarians to connect public library users with books which can improve their quality of life. There is, of course, a social dimension to the informal work that is based on the librarians' interaction with the library users. This means that the proposals they make are based on the knowledge of the material that previous readers have used. In other words, public library staff essentially function as bibliotherapists in action, especially in areas without an official bibliotherapy project.

- *Self-help bibliotherapy*: It refers to the use of self-help and not fiction books that libraries may be regarded as 'mental dispensaries' are often recommended by doctors to provide practical help. Self-help bibliotherapy usually operates as a formal schema "Books on Prescription" (BoP), and libraries are used to supply the appropriate materials. Books are selected on the basis of the cognitive behavioural psychotherapy (CBT) approach and are differentiated from the widely available low-quality self-help resources. The person to which a book is prescribed is expected to use a text without further support from doctors.

Librarians can also engage in "crisis bibliotherapy" or "community bibliotherapy". Crisis bibliotherapy is

intended to provide a safe environment to promote problem-solving. In these situations, the librarian operates as usual and engages in the following activities: preparation of reading lists, information provision, cultural programming, and networking with community agencies. In some cases, mental specialists are involved, offering expert guidance to individual persons. Apparently, librarians should go beyond their established professional role to facilitate the provision of this specific service. In some cases, if considered necessary, they collaborate with mental health professionals for guidance [13].

Looking for the most appropriate scope for implementing a bibliotherapy program in Greece, university libraries could be considered more suitable due to their flexibility. In Greece, a reliable academic library network designs and implements a bibliotherapy program, regardless of the chosen bibliotherapy approach. Academic libraries have an established representative body (HEAL link) with extensive experience in large and demanding projects. They have staff that is likely to adopt new roles more easily, targeting a community of mainly young adults who are considered appropriate for implementing such projects. In addition, many universities have staff well qualified with a great potential for further training. Universities also traditionally offer a variety of social services (accessibility units and psychological support units), with staff that can contribute to the implementation of bibliotherapy programs.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research aimed to set a general framework and examine the relationship between bibliotherapy and librarians. The generic purposive sampling technique [14, p.418] was used instead of a random sample, i.e., a selection of people who can help understand the phenomenon [15]. The sample was as representative as possible, as it should be in these kinds of studies [16]. Although bibliotherapy is widespread in several countries, such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian countries, it is almost unknown in Greece. For this purpose, three of the six participants in this research come from countries other than Greece. Of them, two were approached due to their professional involvement in bibliotherapy. The remainder is connected in various ways to books and reading, and they have a good insight into the therapeutic potential of books. Six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview guide (see Appendix), which comprised a different set of questions for each interviewee as they approached this topic from a different angle, was initially sent to them via email. Half of the participants provided part of their responses in writing, while in a second phase, an online supplementary meeting was held, where these answers were further discussed. The other half of the participants' responses were obtained exclusively via a face-to-face interview.

The following professionals contributed to the present work:

- 1) A clinical psychologist (specialized in cognitive behavioural psychotherapy) who has been engaged in therapy, education and research for over 40 years. He introduced Bibliotherapy in Wales by organizing a national project, which was then extended to the entire United Kingdom and became a model for other countries.
- 2) A successful professional bibliotherapist in Great Britain, coauthor of the successful bibliotherapy book, *The Novel Cure: An A-Z of Literary Remedies* (2013).
- 3) A librarian from Rome, editor of the Italian edition of the book mentioned above and author of the prize-winning novel titled "The Lost Reader".
- 4) A Greek children's book author, chosen because all her books discuss issues that help children understand themselves and the world around them and prevent psychological tensions.
- 5) An award-winning kindergarten teacher has created a pedagogical tool using literature for children's socio-cultural awareness and development.
- 6) A librarian and library director, distinguished as a teacher librarian, was chosen precisely because of her position in the Greek librarianship community and wider public recognition. *References*

IV. RESULTS

After analyzing the interviews of the six (6) participants, their responses were organized thematically into the following themes: 1) The need for alternative (psychotherapeutic) methods, 2) Method, 3) Method effectiveness, and 4) Method acceptance. The last step is the presentation of the qualitative research, which includes the detailed presentation of the previous steps, the connection of the thematic units with the literature and the presentation of excerpts from the interview or observation related to the analysis and interpretation of each thematic unit. As the first interviewee points out, "bibliotherapy is both effective and very cheap", referring to the bibliotherapy program that uses self-help books. "The participation of (English public) libraries in the program helped them survive difficult times. A new service was added to those they already offered and the community's interest in their social role was renewed. This is a win-win program for everyone (and libraries, of course) as it does not replace any other treatment, but instead it can be combined (e.g., with psychotherapy)". The future of bibliotherapy is related to the rise in the use of electronic and audiobooks and the utilization of new technology. "The pandemic has shown that we need to be able to operate remotely, and libraries can have a role under these conditions as well". The second interviewee believes that "the best libraries are those that build a community. We must never forget that we are human because we know how to read. Reading is our most human activity. To me, libraries should be where books are not only studied, but also discussed". The sixth interviewee suggests that "bibliotherapy for librarians" could be included in the

university curriculum. Libraries must find their role in an age where people are looking for something to draw strength from.

For the second interviewee "books are conversation- and communication-starters. They raise important issues and can bring human beings closer. Perhaps literature and reading can help us communicate with mutual respect, without violence and prejudice. That is a great healing exercise." bibliotherapy, after all is the "confidence that books can change people's lives". The third interviewee states: "I really believe in the dynamic that is created when people get together to talk about a book they've read. In group readings, people talk about the book and themselves in a safe environment - it is definitely a form of psychotherapy because people are not afraid to talk about books, while sometimes an upcoming visit to the psychotherapist seems scary".

According to the sixth interviewee, bibliotherapy, in a broader perspective, is the mental support that reading books offers; the relief from loneliness and personal problems which is made possible when someone is part of a book club. She also considers bibliotherapy as an appropriate method for children, and a rather informal form of it is usually applied by kindergarten teachers. The fifth interviewee argues that suitable book-reading programs can work across ages, adapting activities and goals to cognitive, emotional and social needs. The fourth interviewee denotes that "It is certain that books can have a psychotherapeutic character. Perhaps their influence also depends on the character of the child-reader, as some children are more receptive to the messages of books and others less so". The submitting author is responsible for obtaining the agreement of all coauthors and any consent required from sponsors before submitting a paper. It is the obligation of the authors to cite relevant prior work.

Authors of rejected papers may revise and resubmit them to the journal again.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Our results largely confirm the potential of making bibliotherapy an integral part of modern libraries' services. The most widespread bibliotherapy program worldwide is based on the selection of special self-help books that can be prescribed by medical doctors, i.e., books on prescription, where libraries assume the role of "pharmacies". Users can also choose to borrow some of the listed books without a prescription. Another approach entails reading groups as the basis of a group book therapy program in the safe environment of the library. Depending on the approach, the role of the librarian and the need for specific training is differentiated.

Based on the above, two main trends are relevant to the types of books used in bibliotherapy. The first that can be termed «psychological» uses cognitive behavioral therapy and is based mainly on self-help books, which help correct negative behaviours by offering an alternative, positive prospect. The other, called "philosophical", utilizes fiction books. This reading material can be used in individual or

group therapies. In both approaches, other people's memories can be used as the therapeutic basis, as recorded in the books.

The present research confirmed that reading is not just a leisure activity but also a way of addressing mental health problems. It can be used to manage difficult emotions and facilitate the experience of catharsis and empathy. Bibliotherapy is applied with very good results in young individuals as it is linked to education and social development. It helps people to set and achieve goals and understand themselves, others, and their environment. Nowadays, children struggle with various issues, such as adapting to the school environment, bullying, friendship, and cooperation. Bibliotherapy can help them positively respond to these challenges and help to overcoming fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. Many good children's books, with a psychological (essentially bibliotherapy) dimension, can be used as a pedagogical tool for sociocultural encouragement.

Libraries (mainly public and school libraries) can play a pivotal role in bibliotherapy programs. This stems from their irrefutable social role and established connection to society, which will further strengthen via such initiatives. Existing library reading clubs can perhaps serve as the first step towards creating bibliotherapy groups.

One of the key advantages of bibliotherapy is that it provides a low-cost and easily accessible starting point for those who may not have access to traditional therapy. However, it's important to note that bibliotherapy should not be considered a replacement for conventional therapy, but rather as a supplementary form of therapy that can enhance the overall treatment experience. It can also help doctors, nurses, and other health professionals to cope with the saturation of healthcare services. The fact that it can be widely available can and should be considered by the state when developing public policies for mental health care.

Technological progress can be exploited by bibliotherapy, which has been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance sessions help in many cases, regardless of the limitations of the pandemic. Moreover, electronic books and digital material are also good options, except perhaps in cases where bibliotherapy is used to deal with the internet and electronic media addiction.

However, any attempt to introduce new services to libraries necessitates the buy-in of professional librarians. This requires the willingness to accept change and eagerness for new skill development. However, the basic qualification of a bibliotherapist is that they love to read.

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VII. AUTHORS



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Angeliki Antoniou is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies at the University of West Attica specializing in "Adaptive Educational Technologies in Cultural Information". She has many years of teaching experience (undergraduate and postgraduate level), is a course coordinator in the postgraduate program Cultural Heritage Materials and Technologies of the Department of History, Archeology and Cultural Materials Management at the University of Peloponnese and supervises doctoral dissertations at the University College London, University of Peloponnese and the University of West Attica. She is a collaborating researcher at the ATHENS Research Center and at the Department of Information Studies at the University College London. She has participated in many national and international research projects and has been the scientific coordinator and member of the steering committee of the European project H2020 CrossCult. She has numerous publications in conferences and international journals but also organizes scientific conferences and publication of proceedings.



Eftichia Vraimaki is an assistant professor at the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies of the University of West Attica and a member of the Information Management Research Lab. She holds a BA in Librarianship, an MSc in Financial Information Systems from the

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Katerina Maniadaki is a Developmental Psychopathology Professor specialising in ADHD, Deputy Head of the Department of Social Work at the University of West Attica, and Director of the PsySup Lab. Since 1996, she has been working as a clinical psychologist at the Psychological Center "ARSI", where she is responsible

for diagnosing and treating individuals with developmental disabilities. Her research interests include early identification, secondary prevention, and treatment of neurodevelopmental disorders. Her publication record consists of 7 course books at Higher Education Institutions, several chapters in edited volumes, and many international refereed journal and conference papers. Her last book, "The Complete Guide to ADHD: Nature, Diagnosis and Treatment", published by Routledge in 2018, has been internationally reviewed and endorsed. Her biography was presented at the Greek Who is Who in 2012. She has received the Universum Donna 2016 Award from the International Cultural Association Universum Academy Switzerland for contributing to scientific research, culture and humanity.

VIII. APPENDIX

List of the research questions

1st interviewee – clinical psychologist

1. What did make you go into bibliotherapy? How did you come up with that concept?
What did make you take up book therapy professionally?
2. Who could benefit most from such a therapy? Is age relevant, for example?
3. What difficulties did you face in introducing bibliotherapy?
4. Isn't there usually resistance to change?
5. Do you think librarians need specific training to involve in a bibliotherapy project?
6. Could bibliotherapy become a kind of group therapy? Can librarians, for example, organize book therapy sessions to read these specific books to a group of people and discuss it with them?
7. You were joined by many Community Navigators at an event at the Reading Agency. What is a Community Navigator?
8. Could bibliotherapy work as a preventing rather than a treating way? If so, under which conditions?
9. Would you include books other than self-help ones in the reading list such as literature, drama, poetry etc.?
10. Introducing bibliotherapy to a new audience such as the Greek community and a new reality, what would you advice? Where should we make more emphasis?
11. How does the future of bibliotherapy look like, in your opinion?

2nd interviewee – author, librarian

1. What did inspire you to write books with bibliotherapy content?
2. What is bibliotherapy, in your opinion?
3. Your book character «invents» a new profession to make a living, the bibliotherapist. What skills do you think are necessary to practice this profession?
4. Currently, bibliotherapy uses self-help books. As you also imply in your books, do you believe literature and other forms of writing can help in bibliotherapy sessions?
5. Which do you believe is the role of the library in bibliotherapy?
6. Which do you think is the librarian's role in bibliotherapy?
7. How do you imagine the future of book therapy?
8. Can you imagine a situation where psychiatrists provide guidelines to writers and order literature books on demand (e.g. stories) to be used in therapy sessions? How would you see such a collaboration?

3rd Interviewee – bibliotherapist

1. Could you describe a bibliotherapy session?
2. What kind of books do you suggest?
3. You are asking people what kind of readers they are. Do you think book therapy could benefit from readers profiling? Should we recommend different books to

different people? Up to what extent?

4. People of all times seem to use stories for multiple purposes, like building social bonds, entertainment, etc. Could books and stories in our modern individualistic societies still have a social function?
5. In your first video for 2021, you talked about new beginnings. I found this very uplifting and hopeful. Do you think books could help us with the anxiety we all experience due to the pandemic? Could libraries have an active role in this?
6. Just by watching your videos, I felt optimistic and positive. You have a certain charisma and passion and you inspire people. So, how would you describe a good bibliotherapist? What are their characteristics and skills?
7. How do you see the future of bibliotherapy?

4th interviewee – children's book author

1. Do you think that children's books can also have a psychotherapeutic character?
2. From your own books, can you think of any that would help children with any psychological issues they face or any that explain psychological conditions?
3. Have you ever heard of the term bibliotherapy? If not, what do you think it is?
4. How would you feel about receiving book orders from psychotherapists or educators asking you to talk about specific situations in your books (eg. dealing with bullying), possibly following some guidelines?

5th interviewee – teacher

- 1) How was the idea of the action "Playing a Book" born? What exactly is the process?
- 2) Do you think it could work for older children and children with special needs?
- 3) In one of the press interviews you mention that the parents happily accept these actions. Can you think of possible circumstances where the parents would have had a negative reaction?
- 4) What kind of books do you use and why?
- 5) Do you have specific books that you use for specific children's issues? (e.g. phobias)
- 6) Do you think that such kind of activities could take place in children's library environment??
- 7) Could a librarian support this? And if so under what conditions?

6th interviewee – librarian, library director

- 1) What is bibliotherapy according to your opinion?
- 2) Do you think that bibliotherapy can be introduced in Greek libraries?
- 3) Could a librarian support this? If so, under what conditions?
- 4) What changes should happen in the libraries to be able to support bibliotherapy programs?
- 5) What are the difficulties you think will arise?