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## Competent counselor practice for use of bibliotherapy

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## Competent Counselor Practice for Use of Bibliotherapy

By Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson and Paula McMillen

We love books; those who know us know that the perfect present for either of us is a book, any kind of book, or something related to books. We are voracious readers. We recommend books to friends, to students, to clinicians, to faculty, and of course, we recommend them to clients. We began to wonder, "How should a counselor choose the appropriate book for a particular client?" We pondered, "Is it simply a matter of trial and error?"

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## Competent Counselor Practice for Use of Bibliotherapy

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A seasoned counselor considers multiple factors when recommending materials for clients to read; for instance: the counselor's theoretical and practice framework, the therapeutic setting, the client needs and situation, cost factors, client's developmental and reading level, as well as the developmental stage of therapy. That's a lot to take into account! Neophyte counselors lack adequate clinical experience to grasp the complexities of choosing the right book without some additional guidance.

Choosing the wrong book could have ethical and/or potentially damaging consequences for clients, counselors, or organizations. For example, a book with explicit anatomical illustrations may be the right choice for a constructive therapeutic interaction with a child who has experienced sexual abuse. However, it could have a catastrophic impact on funding or even employment if the agency or school administrative team is caught unaware by a concerned group of parents or community partners who don't feel the book is the right choice. Also, preventing re-traumatization caused by exposing clients to content for which they are not ready requires thought. It is essential that counselors have first hand knowledge of materials before they recommend them to clients. Counselors have an ethical responsibility to adequately prepare themselves before they utilize reading materials with clients so that they practice effectively and appropriately in their therapeutic work.

The practice of bibliotherapy is known by many names including biblio-counseling, biblioguidance, literatherapy, library therapeutics, and book matching, among others. Likewise, there are various definitions for bibliotherapy. The definition that we like for the practice of bibliotherapy in counseling comes from Caroline Shrodes: She asserts that bibliotherapy is "the process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and the literature under the guidance of a trained helper" (Shrodes, 1950). Bibliotherapy can be used for resolving normal developmental issues as well as facilitating therapeutic work on more significant clinical issues (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986).

There is an abundance of literature about the benefit of using books in therapy, and as a result, counselors and other helping professionals choose and recommend books to their clients all the time (Pardeck, 1998, 1-27). Certainly, one of the most compelling ways we learn is through stories. Moreover, reading materials can expand the therapeutic process outside of the session, increasing the impact and value for the client. Bibliotherapy can increase self-awareness, assist in the development of empathic understanding, and enhance insight. Books can provide information and help generate alternative perspectives and solutions. Bibliotherapy can promote discussion, stimulate the telling of the client's own story, clarify emerging values, lessen anxiety, and diminish a sense of isolation. Further, books can help individuals expand sensitivity to and experience vicarious immersion in another's culture. Conversely, literature can foster a client's own sense of cultural identity, ethnic pride, and

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self worth (Tway, 1989; Pardeck, 1998, 25-31). Bibliotherapy has been used with all ages and almost every imaginable presenting problem.

When evaluating books for therapeutic use, counselors need to consider several criteria with the particular client or group in mind. We've developed a Book Evaluation Tool which presents many of these criteria, including general structure, subject matter, language, and text (<http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu>). Well-executed, appealing, and developmentally appropriate pictures and illustrations can be enticements to even reluctant readers or to those with attention deficits. Book length depends on how the book will be used; for example, a lengthy book might be appropriate for a client reading at home but not for a classroom guidance unit. Characters and situations depicted should be familiar enough to facilitate identification on the client's part. The vocabulary and themes of the book should be a match for the client's developmental and reading levels. The choice of genre – fiction, non-fiction, poetry, etc. – should be based on an assessment of the client's particular needs. And, of course, cost and relative value are important factors as well. If the book is expensive, the counselor might ask, "Will this have maximum impact for the client?" and "How often will I use this with clients?" Positive answers to these questions may justify the purchase.

Counselors use books in multiple ways and this also influences the choice of materials. Some benefit can be derived by simply giving or recommending a specific book for a client to read (Cohen, 1994; Marrs, 1995), but greater benefits usually derive from interactions with the therapist around the reading material. Some of the many ways that books can be employed therapeutically include reading together, reading to a client, reading parts of a story as a stimulus to client or group discussion or role-play, and reading followed by a creative activity such as drawing or writing. This list is by no means exhaustive; as we know, counselors are a creative bunch and come up with new practice approaches all the time. We haven't even begun to touch on some of the imaginative ways that story telling can be used, but that will have to be another article!

For information on evaluating books for practice, contact Dale Pehrsson at [dale.pehrsson@oregonstate.edu](mailto:dale.pehrsson@oregonstate.edu) or Paula McMillen at [paula.mcmillen@oregonstate.edu](mailto:paula.mcmillen@oregonstate.edu) or check out the Bibliotherapy Education Project's Web site at: <http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu>.

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