

Therapeutic Literature: Bibliotherapy and Narrative Medicine in Disability Studies

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ABSTRACT

Therapeutic approaches in literature such as bibliotherapy and narrative medicine, assist in processing the psychological aspects of disability. They help rebuild identities, create empathy, and combat ableist ideologies. This paper examines the relationship between guided reading and storytelling in terms of their interface with the disability psyche. The paper has utilized primary sources such as Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903), Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), and Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* (2010). The secondary sources include bibliotherapy literature that highlights its effectiveness in improving caregiver self-efficacy in children with disabilities and emotional stability in neurodiverse individuals. Narrative medicine, according to Rita Charon, redefines patient-provider relationships to respect disabled experiences. By integrating these two therapeutic literatures, this paper has shown that therapeutic literature enables disabled voices to be heard, challenges societal exclusion, and connects personal empowerment with collective advocacy in the digital era.

Keywords: Bibliotherapy, Narrative medicine, Disability studies, Neurodiversity, Identity reconstruction, Empathy.

Introduction

Therapeutic literature, which includes bibliotherapy and narrative medicine, represents a potent juncture between the human psyche and literary narratives, especially in the context of disability studies. While bibliotherapy refers to the therapeutic application of reading materials to facilitate personal growth and self-awareness, narrative medicine emphasises the centrality of narratives in healthcare to ensure empathy and understanding between patients and healthcare providers. In the context of understanding various forms of disability, physical, intellectual, and neurocognitive, therapeutic literature represents two distinct avenues for disabled individuals to reinvent themselves and counter the dominant social stigma that often accompanies these conditions.

By engaging with narratives of disabled lives and experiences, readers and patients are able to negotiate the psychological complexities of living in an ableist world and achieve therapeutic goals and empowerment. This article explores the therapeutic literature on disability and its transformative potential, drawing on primary literary texts and scholarly research and critiques on the subject.

Bibliotherapy: Reading as a Tool for Empowerment in Disability Contexts

The effectiveness of bibliotherapy, when defined as the systematic and purposeful use of literature to meet psychological and emotional needs, has been particularly successful with individuals with disabilities. Bibliotherapy can be an additional therapeutic intervention with children who present intellectual disabilities. For these children, bibliotherapy can aid in identifying their specific needs, behaviors, and requirements, with supplementary materials to aid in their education, promoting empathy and cooperation

among professional parents, and individuals with disabilities. This form of bibliotherapy is done by using stories that connect with reader's personal experiences, creating an avenue to address their emotional needs through the characters' stories. For instance, bibliotherapy with women who are caregivers to disabled children has been particularly successful, showing an increase in self-efficacy, allowing them to manage their responsibilities with greater effectiveness, creating an empowering face to overcome societal challenges.

Bibliotherapy can also be used with neurodiverse individuals, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This form of bibliotherapy can aid in the development of social skills, emotional regulations, and empathy. A study with children with ASD showed that bibliotherapy, particularly through initiatives such as the Empathy Reading Project, can aid in developing empathy and creating stronger societal connections through bibliotherapy with parents. For instance, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, published in 2003, is an exemplary case of bibliotherapy, allowing neurodivergent individuals to recognize their cognitive process while educating neurotypical individuals about challenges associated with Theory of Mind. Secondary analysis of studies included in educational literature reviews highlights bibliotherapy's effectiveness in eliminating stereotypes in classroom settings.

Besides, bibliotherapy plays a role in addressing adults living with disabilities arising from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Bibliotherapy helps in mitigating conditions such as anxiety, grief, and PTSD. Bibliotherapy increases emotional intelligence and provides a sense of support. In Nigeria, bibliotherapy is recommended as a tool for addressing attitude barriers in society, thus ensuring educational inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwDs). Biotherapy is also cited in academic literature as part of anger management interventions for learning-disabled teens, where developmental bibliotherapy and music therapy combine in bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy's strength lies in its ability to be versatile and

transform passive reading into an active tool, enabling disabled individuals to write their own stories within the parameters of societal constraints.

Narrative Medicine: Storytelling as Healing in Disability Narratives

Narrative medicine is a discipline that combines elements of storytelling in a clinical context and aims to address issues of ableism in healthcare by encouraging practitioners to engage with patients' narratives of illness. For a person with disability, it helps to move away from the dominant medical paradigm of simply 'fixing' the body to one that also takes account of the relationship and psychological aspects of the human experience. Narrative medicine was first conceptualised by Rita Charon and aims to enable practitioners to co-create narratives with patients that can help bridge the gap between patients and practitioners through careful engagement and representation and a sense of affiliation. For a person with a disability, it helps to move away from a sense of despair and instead focus on possibilities for growth and development through memoirs that outline a journey from despair to self-acceptance.

The primary texts for this field are memoirs such as Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903), which narrates her experiences of deafness and blindness and the reconstruction of self. The memoir also serves as a primary text for the field of narrative medicine and aims to create empathy in a healthcare context. The secondary text includes memoirs such as Christina Crosby's *A Body, Undone* (2016), which discusses acquired disabilities such as paralysis and the themes of interdependence and multiplicity of self that are a part of the narrative after a disability. The scholarly texts from the British Medical Journal discuss the benefits of narrative medicine for doctors to incorporate disabled experiences into their practice and reduce inherent biases.

In addition to this, narrative medicine also intersects with graphic medicine and uses visual storytelling to shed light on the complex nature of disability, as seen in courses that focus on illness narratives. In dealing with familial chronic illness issues, performance ethnography of disability stories reveals the value of sharing personal stories in building understanding and humility. Research has confirmed that this method promotes humanistic engagement and leads to more ethical and successful practice in healthcare by engaging patients on a holistic level rather than on the level of illness alone. Narrative medicine thus expands therapeutic literature by using personal stories to create community tools for healing, especially with regard to the narratives of disabled minority communities.

Case Studies: Literary Examples Connecting Therapy and Disability

In order to illustrate the application, let us consider some examples of literature that has been written with bibliotherapy and narrative medicine in mind. In Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* (2010), the non-speaking protagonist Melody Brooks, who has cerebral palsy, uses technology to express herself and thus act as a form of bibliotherapeutic text that young readers with disabilities like herself may identify with to assert their intelligence and self-efficacy. Secondary educational studies recommend such literature to improve perspectives, instill positive attitudes, and dispel stereotypes in an inclusive setting.

Another example from therapeutic literature that has been written with narrative medicine in mind is Judith Heumann's *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (2020). The memoir tells of Heumann's activism is fighting against systematic barriers in society and has been written with narrative medicine in mind to educate medical practitioners about the social model of disability. Scholarly studies in rehabilitation settings highlight its application in treating intellectual disabilities that often accompany mental illness. In treating intellectual disabilities, adaptations of cognitive-behavioral

therapy that use literary narratives to improve well-being have been shown to have small but significant effects in group settings in meta-analysis. The examples above illustrate that therapeutic literature offers rich and coherent pathways of identity reconstruction in disability studies.

Benefits and Challenges: Navigating Therapeutic Applications

The benefits of therapeutic literature in the field of disability include the reduction of mental health issues, the development of more empathetic behaviors, and the creation of more avenue for inclusion in society. For example, bibliotherapy can have positive effects on the self-perception of teenagers with emotional handicaps, and narrative medicine can aid in the development of trust between patient and their caregivers.

There are, however, certain challenges that need to be addressed in the field of therapeutic literature in the context of disability. For example, the literature has to be adapted in such a way that the literature used can promote stereotypes if not selected appropriately. Other issues, such as poor research methods and the use of small sample sizes in the literature, indicate the need for more effective research in the field. These challenges have to be overcome through interdisciplinary approaches in order to ensure the maximum therapeutic benefit of the literature.

Conclusion

Therapeutic literature, through the use of bibliotherapy or narrative medicine, plays an important role in the development of the human psyche in the field of disability by providing tools for healing, more

empathetic behaviors, and the ability to advocate for oneself. From the foundational literature of Kelly's memoirs to more formal scholarly works, therapeutic literature provides the framework for coherent personal development in the midst of societal challenges. The development of the field of disability literature provides the promise of more inclusive and more empathetic ways of understanding the human mind through the use of therapeutic literature, allowing the reader to navigate their own unique narrative journey through the world.

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