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Transportations of space, time and self: The role of therapeutic reading groups in managing mental distress in the community.

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Abstract

Background

The practice of reading and discussing literature in groups is long established, stretching back into classical antiquity (Fischer, 2004). While benefits of therapeutic reading groups have been highlighted, research into participants' perceptions of these groups has been limited (Walwyn & Rowley, 2011).

Aims

To explore the experiences of those attending therapeutic reading groups, considering the role of both the group, and the literature itself, in participants' ongoing experiences of distress.

Method

Eleven participants were recruited from two reading groups in the South East of England. One focus group was run, and eight individuals self selected for individual interviews. The data were analysed together using a thematic analysis drawing on dialogical theories.

Results

Participants described the group as an anchor, which enabled them to use fiction to facilitate the discussion of difficult emotional topics, without referring directly to personal experience. Two aspects of this process are explored in detail: the use of narratives as transportation, helping to mitigate the intensity of distress; and using fiction to explore possibilities, alternative selves and lives.

Conclusions

For those who are interested and able, reading groups offer a relatively de-stigmatised route

to exploring and mediating experiences of distress. Implications in the present UK funding environment are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Books allowed me access into other worlds, worlds where there were endless possibilities. In the realms of my imagination the characters and stories in books captivated and entranced me, became meaningful to me to the extent that I internalised them inside me, so that I felt less alone and the world still held some magic and wonder for me. (Dillon, 2010, p. 25–6)

Dillon here encapsulates the role that reading fiction played in coping with her childhood experiences of abuse and trauma. Trapped into an abusive situation, with no power, as a child, to change her circumstances, she describes using fiction to escape, to create hope, and imagine possibilities beyond her tortured existence. The characters and stories here become part of her social world, and consequently part of her subjectivity, acting as counters to the abusive adults in her physical world. This is a powerful example of one way in which fiction can play a role in managing and mediating experiences of distress, abuse and trauma. While Dillon here describes fiction as an individual escape, a secret world, this paper will explore the role of reading fiction as a therapeutic group practice.

1.2 Literacy, the arts and mental health services.

The therapeutic function of reading has long been recognised (Jack & Ronan, 2008), and the concept of a reading group reaches back to antiquity (Fischer, 2004). The early years of the 21st century, however, have seen a rise in their popularity (Hartley, 2002); the number of library-linked reading groups in England and Wales doubled between 2004 and 2008 to approximately 10,000 (TRA, 2008). Therapeutic reading groups have developed particularly over the last two decades (Walwyn & Rowley, 2011): in 2010, 87% of library authorities

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offered such groups (Hicks et al., 2010), while yet more are run by local and national charities. This growth can be seen to resonate with the rise in community arts projects to promote mental health (White, 2003).

Austerity in the UK, however, has meant that funding for therapeutic community arts projects are threatened from two directions: falling funding for community mental health service provision (CMH et al, 2012), and even deeper cuts to funding for arts and culture (eg, CILIP, 2012; Hastings et al, 2015). Within this context, it is crucial to identify the specific contribution of community arts initiatives and their role in promoting good mental health (Hicks et al., 2010). Performing and visual arts have generally had a higher profile in research, leaving relatively little research focusing specifically on reading groups (TRA, 2003). Furthermore, while the government policy framework (DoH, 2011; 2012) suggests that all aspects of public services should play their part in improving mental health outcomes, especially at a local level, there is no mention of the role of arts or libraries. This paper will hence examine the specific contribution that reading groups can play in managing distress in the community.

1.3 Reading and mental distress: Therapeutic uses of fiction.

The practice of reading fiction for therapeutic purposes is known as 'creative reading', a term used to separate the practice from the more medical term 'bibliotherapy' (Amer, 1999; Kuspshik & Fischer, 1999). The latter is mainly used to describe the 'prescription' of books directly related to particular forms of distress, or indeed outlining particular therapeutic approaches such as CBT (Frude, 2004). Fanner & Urquhart (2008), however, suggest that including fiction and poetry alongside self-help bibliotherapy schemes would be beneficial,

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and that 'leisure reading' could help with coping with distress. Literary charity 'The Reading Agency', for instance, offers a list of 'mood-boosting' books alongside its 'Books on Prescription' scheme (Seale, 2014). In creative reading, literature has been viewed as facilitating the exploration of problems and the expression, and possible resolution, of difficult thoughts and feelings (McArdle & Byrt, 2001; Gersie & King 1990), as well as aiding the recognition of the self in literary characters (Cohen, 1994). In contrast to self-help bibliotherapy, it can also be seen to allow individuals to look at a problem or situation in a more indirect way (Hodge, Robinson & Davis, 2007). Research by library and information professionals also showed that difficulties in concentrating when depressed, made books directly addressing mental health difficult to read; escapist literature was preferable (Brewster et al, 2013). In addition, bibliotherapy is usually a lone pursuit, and though it can sometimes make the reader feel less alone, in some cases it may serve to exacerbate issues of isolation and loneliness (Chase, 2011, Repper & Perkins, 2003). For this reason, therapeutic reading groups have been set up, which aim to combine the benefits of peer support groups (Davidson et al, 1999), with the potentials of fiction reading for exploring and imagining experiences of distress.

Reading together has been argued to act as a "powerful coalescing presence" (Hodge et al., 2007, p. 102) which enables both individual subjective and shared experience; reading groups can hence be seen to recreate an 'interpretative community' (Fish, 1980) which negotiates the meaning of the text together. Long (2003) suggests that the social relationships in the group can encourage alternative ways of reading as well as facilitating social bonding. Sharing a story has also been argued to give individuals a common frame of reference (Bhattacharyya, 1997); it can be seen to universalise a dilemma, reducing a sense

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of isolation. Interacting with others who share core lived narratives can also be viewed as a way for individuals to strengthen and validate their own beliefs (Wilson, 2012). Identification with fictional characters through reading could be seen to potentially aid the discussion of feelings of distress (McKenna et al., 2010), by distancing individuals from their own particular lived experience and thus “make psychic pain bearable” (Bhattacharyya, 1997, p. 13). This is not necessarily unique to reading; in other contexts of group work, sharing problems have been seen as important for healing (Yalom, 1975). However, Wolf (2008) suggests it is reading literature in particular that exposes individuals to “both the commonality and the uniqueness of our thoughts” (p. 8).

While such potential benefits of therapeutic reading groups have been highlighted (Davis, 2009; Walwyn & Rowley, 2011), research into participants’ experiences of the groups has been limited (McKenna, Hevey & Martin, 2010; Walwyn & Rowley, 2011). This project thus aimed to explore the subjective experience of reading groups, from the perspective of those attending. Under investigation were both the role of the group itself, in terms of what it offered that differed from reading alone, and the role of the practice of reading in managing distress in the community.

2. Method

This was a qualitative project, utilising a mixed design of group and individual data collection. The project focused on participants’ general feelings about reading, and their experience both of the process of reading, and of the group. Both individual and group data collection techniques were used to capture different parts of the experience: group

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dynamics in the focus groups, and more individual, emotional engagement with reading in the interviews.

2.1 Participants, recruitment and ethics

There were 11 participants, ranging in age from early 40s to mid 60s; all were white. Of these, eight were then interviewed individually. All participants lived in Southeast England and were members of reading groups for individuals diagnosed with mental health conditions. Participants had a range of diagnoses, including Clinical Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Personality Disorders. Two groups were recruited. One group was run in a day centre, by the library service, and read books aloud, sharing the reading between them; reading aloud was not compulsory to minimize potential anxiety for participants. The second was run in a local library by a third sector organisation. This group read the books individually and then discussed their thoughts as a group. Both groups met every two weeks.

Ethical approval was gained from the host university. Participants were initially told, face-to-face, about the nature of the study and given information leaflets to take away. When participants registered interest, they were given an information sheet and consent form. They were informed that the content of the interviews would be confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were signposted to appropriate support in the event of feeling distressed by the research. All names and biographical details have been anonymised for confidentiality.

2.3 Analytical approach

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The two types of data were analysed together, using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2007). The epistemological position taken in this research is critical realist. The theoretical work underlying the analysis focused on the relationship between narratives and experience. The meaning of both subjectivity and fictional narratives was taken to be contestable and socially negotiated (see, Fish, 1980; Denzin, 1989; Squire, 2005, Ricoeur, 1991, etc). Both lived and fictional narratives were seen as drawing on shared cultural resources, as well as their telling being part of the nexus of activities which in turn constitute culture (Denzin, 1989; Squire, 2005). Narratives, both lived and fictional, were hence seen as being an important tool for fashioning subjectivity (Campbell, 1998). The research question, and the participants' data, required a specific understanding of how fictional narratives could potentially become subjectively important. A particularly useful idea was that of the 'dialogical self' (Hermans, 1996; 2001; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This postulates that the self is structured in dialogue, formulated through interactions with the world, including external and fictional narratives. Due to the fluctuating, dialogical nature of subjectivity, people are understood to simultaneously hold multiple 'I-positions', located in different interactions (Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Here, these I-positions are also argued to be held in relation to fictional narratives and characters. A consideration of dialogue and positioning was not, however, taken here to mean narratives are wholly constitutive of subjectivity; embodiment, affect and materiality are all also considered in the analysis as central to subjective experience (see, e.g. Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Brown & Stenner, 2009). One of the key considerations was to consider how fictional narratives might interpolate and mediate affective, embodied experience.

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3.1 Results and Discussion

Participants described the group as a safe place, which provided an anchor, enabling them to use the fictional narratives to positively mediate experiences of distress. This was made possible through the use of the book as a focus, a common narrative, which facilitated the discussion of difficult emotional topics without reference to personal experience. Reading itself helped participants escape the intensity of their distress by transporting them in space and time, as well as enabling the exploration of possible selves, through the embodiment of multiple positions in relation to the text and their own subjectivity.

4.1. 'The same boat': The group as an anchor

Participants described the shared experience of distress as centrally important. Lisa, for instance, highlighted the group members' shared experiences of distress as creating a differentiated space:

I think because it's the company and also, if you're chatting you kind of relate, we're all in the kind of the same boat whereas outside it's different (Lisa, l. 232–234)

Lisa's analogy of "the same boat" suggests an experience of both separation and safety; this can be seen to refer to the regularly noted lack of visibility of distress in normative public space (Foucault, 1965; Parr, 2006; McGrath, Reavey & Brown, 2008). One strength of peer support has often been noted to be the practice of making experiences which may be viewed as 'abnormal' in everyday life become 'normal' within a group which share those experiences (Davidson et al, 1999; Romme & Escher, 1993). More generally, positive

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relationships and experiences of belonging are known to be central to wellbeing and good mental health (Pilgrim, Rogers & Bentall, 2009). Participants also noted the importance of the use of the reading material, in contrast to a generic peer support group:

we need the books as well don't we? I don't think we could just come and sit here and talk... (Julie, FG, lines 1207–8)

Greg noted this was:

because there's a focus on the book, you're not just, it's not a group therapy session ... even though it can turn into that sometimes, it's more focused. (Greg, l. 131–3)

While Julie saw the book as a tool for social facilitation:

It stimulates the brain because you, you have to talk in this group ... like you're saying about yoga and all that, and art, you don't really have to say much ... you're in your own little world, doing your own little thing. (Julie, FG, l. 1320–1325)

The shared narrative of the fiction is here described as providing a communal focus for the group, both enabling discussion and potentially demonstrating to individuals the “commonality and uniqueness of their thoughts” (Wolf, 2008, p. 8). The picture emerging here is that the combination of both the peer support provided by the group, and the reading material, facilitate a specific mode of interacting, enabling the discussion of distress,

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without an integral expectation of personal disclosure. Within this context, participants described two particularly crucial ways in which the reading material mediated their experiences of distress, in ‘escaping intensity’ and ‘exploring possibility’.

4.2 Escaping intensity: Affective transportations in space and time

One of the primary functions of reading seemed to be the ability of the narratives in the reading materials to enable them to transport in space and time, thus de-intensifying (see McGrath & Reavey, 2015) some of the embodied emotional experiences of distress. Participants described being transported to another world, escaping their circumstances:

[reading] takes my mind, it's a therapy when I'm not feeling too good (Anna, l. 154–55).

it just gets me out, it gets me out of my life cos I'm not happy at home (Lisa, l. 314–315).

I like the, er, the image of the land that Tolkien has has, kind of, invented and I escape to the world of Middle Earth. (Greg, l. 45–7)

All participants here describe using reading as a transportation activity, echoing Spufford’s (2002) motivation for reading fiction: “I wanted them to take me away. I wanted exodus” (p. 82). Lisa and Anna use metaphors of travel here; they describe reading as mediating a movement ‘out’ or ‘away’ from the space in which their distress is located. Similarly, in

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‘escaping’ to the world of Middle Earth, Greg describes using the imaginary space of the narrative to create an alternative to the literal space he inhabits as a distressed self. All the participants describe these movements as ones of release or relief, highlighting the fictional narrative as a tool to de-intensify their experiences, also seen in physical movement (see McGrath & Reavey, 2015). These experiences of escape can be seen as particularly salient due to the known role of entrapment in the development of distress (e.g., Brown, Harris & Hepworth, 1995).

Another form of transportation described by the participants was through time. Several participants described the appeal of fiction set in the historical past, which was often described as a more idyllic, or less complicated, than the present. As Simon commented:

It’s because that world doesn’t exist anymore, erm, life is different, people’s attitudes are different, it’s [the present] a very grim time. (Simon, l. 175–177)

Similarly, Greg described the attraction of:

the kind of atmosphere of Tudor England it helps problems with life and mental images come up in my mind and I just escape into that land...
(Greg, l. 41–44)

Here an idealised, safe version of the past seems to be used to enable participants to escape from the complexities of the present (a “very grim time”). Transportation here is not only narrative, it is also affective and atmospheric (Anderson, 2008). Simon and Greg here seem

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to describe evoking the 'stimmung' (Gumbrecht, 2012; Heidegger, 1927), or atmosphere, of the historical past as a way to temporarily dissipate the 'grim' affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2008) of the present. The fictional narrative here is used to mediate their current subjective position and experience, again to de-intensify some of their present distress.

A similar process can be seen in the invocation of personal pasts, with participants describing using reading as a way to use them to evoke recollections of childhood:

It was a book I read as a child during O'levels and I remember that and a kind of nostalgia ... (Greg, l. 26–7)

I mean my mother and father always used to read to me when I was little and I think it goes back to them, people don't do it anymore do they... (Anna, l. 122–5)

While Simon recalled reading, in a similar way to Dillon (2010), as a positive memory from a difficult childhood:

I find that it's childhood books that comfort me... and they're the ones that when I'm really distressed that I will delve into and read ... there's just something comforting, they're easy, they remind you of your childhood to a degree, although a place in your childhood where it was happy, cos you might have a difficult childhood but that place that I was reading I was always happy (Simon, l. 47–57).

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In these extracts, the participants seem to position reading as a nostalgic practice, which invokes the affective experience of happy parts of childhood. For Anna, this is through the practice of care evoked by her parents reading to her; for Simon, it is more directly the re-living of a positive affective experience, brought about by revisiting familiar narratives. Simon's relocation to "a place in childhood where it was happy" could be seen to represent a repositioning of the self, away from distress. Reading fiction is thus described as a practice that participants used to actively mediate their current experiences, to return, or escape, to a less distressed space, time and subjective position.

4.3 Reading as possibility: Character identification and the polyphonic reading group.

Reading literature also enabled participants to explore possibilities of other lives and selves both through identification with other characters, and the richness of the discussion in the group. Greg, for instance, highlighted the capacity of reading to live as a character, an alternative to his own subjective position:

I hate my life so I, I go into other people's lives in books and films and just become them... so I just like to get into someone else's life and go through their sufferings and joys and things, yeah, and I find it very therapeutic, yeah. (Greg, FG, l. 687–688)

I like to escape to someone else's shoes . . . into their world, into their society, into their, into their, into their lives, escape from myself and and find this new persona. (Greg, lines 605–608).

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Greg here describes becoming fictional characters, embodying their emotional states and subjectivity. As in the previous section, this enables an escape from his own distressed embodiment, but Greg describes more than transporting himself to a different space or time. The barriers between Greg and the 'other' of the characters are here dissolved (Long, 2003), allowing him to experience the world through a different I-position (Hermans, 1996), that of the character. The identification with imaginary characters, living as a "new persona", can thus be seen as being a tool used to fashion subjectivity (Campbell, 1998), through the (temporary) exploration of imagined possible selves and lives, free from concrete consequences. Potential benefits of this practice become clear when considering that certain forms of distress have been argued to be experienced as a loss of possibility, a shrinkage of possible futures (Ratcliffe, 2015).

In order to experience reading as an alternative I-position (Hermans, 1996), Greg and Jenny suggest that:

You have to like the main protagonist, otherwise it can be a bit of a difficult read ... you have to identify with the person, yeah. (Greg, lines 53–8)

I need to care about what happens to them, I need to find something er worthwhile in the characters and some-, sometimes it's that I'm just really sympathetic to their plight or yeah, erm, I might not like them quite, but there's something about them that I have empathy with or I erm just find interesting, erm, to keep me reading, to find out what happens to them (Jenny, lines 92–99)

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Identification is here posited as central to the process of living through an alternative position, a pull into the world of the character, indicating that the relation with the self is crucial. The role of the group in discussing the shared narrative of the book, also seemed to offer a safe space for multiple positions to be taken in relation to the text. Philip described the different reactions to *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro:

Now Florence ... she recommended it and she said she'd read it and thoroughly enjoyed it. Now I read it but I wouldn't say I thoroughly enjoyed it. It really made me feel uneasy ... I thought that was a very bleak view of the, of the future and we, and most people agreed with that... (Philip, lines 238–247)

Similarly, the focus group voiced differing views of Thomas Hardy:

Simon: ... and one was Tess of the D'Urbervilles, which I think is the most depressing book ever written and yet my mum says 'oh it's a beautiful book' and I say 'oh god, it made me want to slit my throat...'

Roger: Oh I'm a great Hardy fan, I think it's really great.

(FG, l. 311–317)

Different positions in relation to the text are hence voiced within the group, around a shared central narrative. These agreements and disagreements can be seen as a further way in which the discussion around a central 'anchor' of the text enables a safe way to negotiate

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different positions in relation to the text. A metaphor for the group could be a “polyphonic novel” (Bakhtin, 1993). The group here – like the novel – is a place of dialogue, with different voices or positions making up the gestalt of the group (Hermans, 1996). It is in this space of the group that dialogical exchanges occur, creating an ‘imaginal landscape’ (Cunha et al., 2012) that can be a place for individuals to experiment with alternative positions and possibilities. Philip further highlighted the role of group dialogue:

reading it and sort of wondering you know how other people or imagining how somebody's going to react to something, having got to know them a bit, you know, you can sort of in a way perhaps predict you know, can't always of course but you know sometimes, you can predict how they're maybe going to react to it (Philip, l. 497–502).

Reading here, even when alone, is revealed as a wholly social activity. It can also be seen as the place where the individual and the social coalesce, transcending the dichotomy of individual and society, with reading being firmly social and not an individualistic and solitary activity (Long, 2003; Swann & Allington, 2009).

5. Conclusions

Both the capacity of narratives to aid transportation – whether in time or space – in order to escape intensity, and to enable participants to explore possible selves, demonstrate the helpful function of a therapeutic reading group. Fictional narratives are here argued to be a useful tool, mediating individuals’ relationship with the world, and helping them to make

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sense of their lives (Ligorio, 2012), through configuring “untold stories of lived experience” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 435). This is made particularly possible because of the anchoring provided for participants by the reading group. Offering a safe place, from which participants can explore their experiences, seemed to function through the different perspectives in the group coalescing as a ‘polyphonic’ (Bakhtin, 1993) engagement with the text.

One potential advantage of reading groups is their non-stigmatised status; reading is a valued activity. Additionally, taking part in a reading group can be viewed as an activity that takes on a ‘bridging role’, facilitating access to a greater range of resources and opportunities (Repper & Perkins, 2003; Tew, 2011). Bridging credentials could be enhanced, as in one of the groups, by the involvement of a facilitator not experiencing mental distress, if the group is held in a “general public community premises” (Chase, 2011, p. 72) – which libraries arguably are – and through the association of a reading group being in ‘mainstream’ society. Although library staff are not trained in mental health, and should not fill the gap in mental health services, they can be seen to occupy a gatekeeping role, whereby they direct the public to bibliotherapy (Neville, 2014). Undoubtedly, there are limitations to the use of reading groups as a therapeutic tool, such as fluctuating levels of concentration experienced by some individuals with mental health conditions, particularly considering the medication that some may be taking, and possible low literacy levels. These limitations can, in some cases, be mitigated by reading aloud together (Davis, 2009), though the challenges of reading aloud such as social anxiety and the potential for feelings of shame, should be considered.

Within the current funding environment in the UK, however, it is notable that community hubs such as libraries are being cut, along with their staff, leaving fewer spaces

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from which groups could be run (Hastings et al, 2015). It is, however, hoped that the findings from this study contribute to the understanding of the therapeutic role that reading groups may play in experiences of living with mental distress, and the way in which they could make a valuable contribution to existing forms of therapy. Returning to Dillon's (2010) opening quote, there seems to be great potential for reading in groups to facilitate access to other worlds, to provide an anchor, and open up new possibilities, for those living with ongoing distress.

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