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Self-help books and bibliotherapy: Reflections for Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of self-help books with therapeutic aims; and to propose suggestions by discussing the present situation of self-help books in Turkish cultural context. Taking these aims into account, the existing literature on self-help books is initially reviewed, and a picture of the self-help books in Turkey is drawn regarding the current status of bibliotherapy. Considering Turkey, there firstly exists a confusion in differentiating between self-help books and self-development books. In addition, Turkish self-help books are mainly translations of popular western self-development books lacking the elements of Turkish culture. Thus, original Turkish self-help books are required for personal uses of the readers and professional therapeutic practices. And there is a need for further investigations regarding Turkish context as to how mental health practitioners and clients conceive and make use of self-help books.

Keywords: Self-help books; bibliotherapy, counseling

1. Introduction

Whether reading leads to therapeutic change has been a controversial topic for mental health professionals since the time when the ancient Greeks wrote on the entrance of their libraries as "Medicine for the Soul". For hundreds of years, books have been exploited to help individuals feel better. However, a common sense about the use of books as therapeutic tools has not yet been reached among helping professionals. Considering the existing literature, the terms bibliotherapy and self-help books are both preferred by the scholars; and the former is particularly used as an umbrella term to denote using books in therapy sessions. For this reason, bibliotherapy and self-help books are interchangeably used in this study. Several definitions of bibliotherapy exist in the extant literature. Lenkowsky (1987) noted that bibliotherapy is "the use of reading to create affective change, personality growth and development". According to Katz and Watt (1992), bibliotherapy is "the guided use of reading with a therapeutic outcome in mind". Moreover, the online dictionary of "mindisorders.com" in its 2009 version defines bibliotherapy as "an adjunct to psychological treatment that integrates appropriate books or other written materials, usually intended to be read outside of psychotherapy sessions, into the treatment process". Thus; three important elements can be signified accordingly: an inside/outside-session reading material, therapeutic purpose and personal betterment.

Although the use of self help books for therapeutic purposes may seem to be a novel concept for many, it has been commonly used since Middle Ages in fact. Books were prescribed for physical and moral purposes in the 18th century Europe when libraries were founded in psychiatry hospitals. However, bibliotherapy turned out to be a

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popular topic in the second part of the 20th century for counselors, social workers, psychologists and educators. In the present day, the already existing literature of bibliotherapy has been growing more and more. Regarding the existing Turkish literature on bibliotherapy, studies were flourished in the late 1980s (Öner, 1987) and have become prevailing in the 2000s (e.g. Karacan & Yerin-Güneri, 2010; Öner, 2007). Despite the existence of self-help books in the Turkish market for many years, the use of books for therapeutic aims is quite new. Thus, this current study intends to explore the history/the nature, the advantages and limitations of the use of self-help books with therapeutic aims in therapy sessions; and to discuss the current state of self-help books in Turkish cultural context by providing suggestions.

2. Review of Literature

The current literature has elaborated several aspects of bibliotherapy. Four stages were identified in bibliotherapy process (Öner, 2007). Initially, the clients are expected to identify themselves with a story character that bears similarities to their own lives. Then, clients live through a catharsis, an emotional release after they realize that they are not alone in experiencing problems; the clients may orally state, write, draw or even role-play to convey their feelings (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). After the catharsis, the clients gain insight through the investigation of the decisions and action of the attributed character. By this way, the clients are assisted to create their own problem solving mechanisms (Gregory & Vessey, 2004). In addition, Campbell and Smith (2003) identified six main goals of bibliotherapy; providing information, generating insight, stimulating discussion, creating awareness of others' problems, providing solutions to problems and settling problems. Analyzing the bibliotherapy literature, Lenkowsky (1987) stated that there may be four applications of bibliotherapy. To begin with, bibliotherapy can be utilized as a "self-actualization/ problem solving" tool to endorse better self-understanding and problem solving. Secondly, bibliotherapy may be aimed for "social utilization" to reinforce a person's social awareness. The next one is the "psychotherapeutic utilization" which intends to develop psychological insight and growth. Lastly, self-help books may be applied for "educational and didactic utilization" to teach how to use bibliotherapy. Reflecting on how to integrate self-help books into psychotherapy, Campbell and Smith (2003) suggested that therapists should initially decide whether to use a self-help book as an adjunctive (homework) or integrative purpose (in session). Therapists' second concern should be whether to assign fiction or nonfiction books. In detailed terms, clients will identify themselves with a character in a fiction book; on the other hand, nonfiction books tell the problem solving method of a particular issue in a step by step fashion. Finally, clinical use of the self-help books in such cases as depression, anxiety or eating disorders, or their informational use regarding step-families, communication skills or weight management should be considered together for an efficient integration.

The readership profile of the self-help books and the cultural matters were interests of the researchers. For example, Wilson & Cash (2000) stated that having a positive attitude towards reading in general, being more psychologically minded, having a stronger self-control and having greater life satisfaction were the factors predicting a favorable view towards self-help books. In addition, women and psychology majors were reported to be more positive towards bibliotherapy in the same study. According to Bergsma (2008), the readers of the Dutch monthly "Psychology Magazine" were mostly rich and highly educated females (73%) aged between 20-50. These findings indicate that demographic variables (age, gender, education and socio-economic status) and personality characteristics play an important role in assigning clients a self-help book. Culture also seems to be a key aspect in the use of self-help books. In effect, self-help books were considered as fitting well to an individualistic culture in which persons can follow happiness freely for their own sake (Bergsma, 2008). According to Starker (1989), since people can rise with the help of their own abilities, and they can only be judged on their own individual accomplishments, self-help is an essential component of the American culture.

Bibliotherapy has been widely utilized for various types of problems such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, stress, personal growth, child rearing, sexuality or communication with a partner. Among these, depression is the most common one which has drawn the most attention from the researchers (Cuijpers, 1997; Anderson et al., 2005; Richardson, Richards & Barkham, 2008). Starker (1989) cited four practical reasons of the wide use of self help books. Firstly, self-help books have cost-effectiveness; that is, it is cheaper than to consult a professional. Next, they are easily accessible; whenever a person needs help, they are within access. Privacy is the third factor that encourages people to explore their problem on their own. Lastly, self-help books provide excitement for their readers because they easily become a member of an in-group of a best-seller self-help book; and thus, they have something to share with the others. Nevertheless, Bergsma (2008) investigated 57 best-selling self-help books in the Netherlands and pointed out that these books chiefly aimed to boost personal capabilities rather than lessening

the psychological symptoms of the problems. The same study also reported that personal growth, personal relations, coping with stress and identity were the main themes of those books. Furthermore, researchers have developed different schemes for self-help book prescription. Although there are more than 20 diverse self-help book schemes, the first original scheme from which the others were adapted was Cardiff model (Frude, 2004). The Cardiff model entails that the clients initially present their problem to the helping professional; then, the practitioner prescribes a suitable self-help book from a list covering the essential health topics; after that the clients take their self-help book from a library where self-help books are thematically, and systematically stored. According to Farrand (2005), an effective self-help book scheme will not only increase access to a feasible form of psychological treatment but it will also facilitate making self-help approach available to a great number of individuals. Farrand (2005) proposed a new model named "the Devon Supported Self-Help Book Prescription Scheme" which is different from others in terms of the provision of the support of the mental health specialist. In this model, the practitioner provides an explanation of the self-help process, and the client is the one who decides to pursue a self-help book treatment. Clients get their book from the public libraries, and they obtain support from the practitioner throughout the treatment process.

Turkish academic works concerning bibliotherapy can be grouped in two categories; literature reviews and experimental studies. Literature reviews mainly addressed the definitions and therapeutic uses of self-help books for different age groups (Bulut, 2010; Öner, 1987; Öner & Yeşilyaprak, 2006; Öner, 2007; Uçar, 1996). Regarding the experimental studies, Yılmaz (2002) found out a significant positive effect of biblio-counseling in the degree of parent-teen conflicts which ninth grade high school students experienced. Another experimental study conducted by Karacan and Yerin-Güneri (2010) explored the effectiveness of a self-esteem enhancement biblio-counseling program on the self-esteem of the sixth grade secondary school students. The results of this study indicated that the self-esteem scores of the students who were treated by the program significantly increased. Regarding Turkey, it is clear that more studies are needed in the use of self-help books with therapeutic goals. Thus, this study aims to discuss the current state of self-help books and the use of bibliotherapy by offering some suggestions for the therapeutic use of self-help books in Turkey.

3. Positive Arguments on Self-help Books

There are studies asserting that bibliotherapy is an effective technique that can bring about behavioral and emotional change (Karacan & Yerin-Güneri, 2010; Yılmaz, 2002). Bergsma (2008) believes that there is a good reason to expect positive outcomes from employing self-help books as the messages of the self-help books fit well for cliental situations. For example, participants from a survey examining the readers' evaluations of self-help books reported that self-help books were helpful for them in several respects; opening new paths, providing more self-confidence, helping to understand themselves and others, gaining insight, having a peace of mind and learning about stress (Starker, 1989). The results of another study (Starker, 1988) exploring attitudes and practices of 123 psychologists toward self-help books indicated that psychologists praising self-help books positively were the frequent readers and supporters of the therapeutic value of self-help books. In a study (Keeley, Williams, & Shapiro, 2002) surveying 265 British cognitive behavior therapists' attitudes towards and use of structured self-help materials, it was found that 88.7% of the therapist generally used self-help materials like books, audio tapes, video tapes and computerized delivery. Of these materials, 94.8% of them was in written form. Accordingly, depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder were the most common problems which were dealt with mostly written materials with a CBT approach. Yet, the same study emphasized that only 36.2% of the participants had training on the use of self-help materials; thus, it is not surprising that educated cognitive behavior therapists had more positive attitudes and advised self-help materials more. As mentioned before, the empirical studies about the effectiveness of bibliotherapy largely involve treatment of depression. In a meta-analysis of self-administered treatments of three depression bibliotherapy treatments, an effect size of 0.74 was reported (Gould& Clum, 1993). Furthermore, Cuijpers (1997) got an effect size of 0.83 from a meta-analysis of seven depression bibliotherapy studies. In addition to the studies of depression, several meta-analytic studies exploring whether bibliotherapy yielded positive results have been conducted by researchers (Scogin, Bynum, Stephens, & Calhoon, 1990; Marrs, 1995) and these studies resulted an effect size above .50 (large effect) which means bibliotherapy can be an effective treatment approach.

4. Arguments on the Limitations of Self-help Books

In contrast to the works supporting bibliotherapy, there is research arguing bibliotherapy is not as efficient

as claimed. A study (Febbraro, Clum, Roodman & Wright, 1999) comparing the differential effectiveness of bibliotherapy alone, and bibliotherapy plus daily self-monitoring, monitoring alone and wait-list in persons with panic attacks revealed conflicting results. First of all, bibliotherapy was not found to be an effective treatment for panic disorder. What is more, even the amplified therapist contact plus self-help books did not have any effect in contrast to the existing studies (e.g. Marrs, 1995) stating therapist contact is significant in dealing with anxiety via bibliotherapy. Moreover, Paul (2001) thinks that self-help books are full of myths; and readers should be wary of the myths while reading them. According to Bergsma (2008), another limitation of self-help books is the idea of "one-size fits all"; that is, self-help books are laden with hundreds of suggestions for the betterment of the individuals. However, each individual brings a different personality and problem to the therapy sessions. Researchers also warn that a self-help book intending for important changes in a person may also have harmful results. To illustrate, Rosen (1987) argued that a self-help book may cause individuals to blame themselves, and their symptoms may even get worse. In their study examining how to integrate self-help books into psychotherapy, Campbell and Smith (2003) proposed that without considering several factors like client characteristics (demographic, ethnic and cultural characteristics), goals and professional standards (training, ethics) before assigning a self-help book to a client, it would not be a meaningful intervention. Indeed, studies also indicated that demographic and personal characteristics of the individuals have a gross effect on helping individuals (Wilson & Cash, 2000; Bergsma, 2008). Ignoring the culture in which people live is another concern reported by the studies. Cherry (2008) assumes that self-help books take the individuals as the basis for intervention and forget about the social influence on themselves. The individualistic perspective of the self-help books were also criticized by McGee (2005) stating that people have unique characteristics tailored in their cultural context. Moreover, self-help books are highly criticized by feminist scholars since they think that self-help books victimize women by disregarding the cultural context of the individuals (Kaminer, 1993; Simonds, 1992). For example, a study (Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001) analyzing the top 10 books on the New York Times best-seller list over 10 years (1988-1998) concluded that nearly all of the books considered the gender as a major focus. And almost half of the books obviously and particularly supported the traditional, power-based women and men relationship; and most of the advice for betterment was for females.

5. Discussion

Before discussing the present situation of bibliotherapy in Turkey, it should be noted that a confusion exists about the Turkish description of the self-help books. The term "self-development book" is mostly used in Turkey to refer to all types books related to self-assistance. Interestingly however, there is a distinction between "self-help books" and "self-development books" in American and European sources. While the former covers the books on mental health, friendship, confidence, spiritual enlightenment, intimacy or stress; the latter comprises the books dealing with student success, richness or personal achievement. Hence, to avoid the confusion, an initial distinction between self-help books and self-development books is required. So, bibliotherapy as a cost effective, self-healing approach may offer innovative modalities for individual and group practices to the Turkish counselors and therapists. In fact, Yılmaz (2002), Karacan and Yerin-Güneri (2010) have already reported that biblio-counseling was effective in parent-teen conflicts and self-esteem enrichment in Turkish schools. According to the 2009-2010 data of the Turkish Ministry of education (http://orgm.meb.gov.tr/), the vast majority of the counselors are serving in the schools. Thus, gaining information and practice about bibliotherapy becomes particularly significant for school counselors. For this reason, bibliotherapy courses should be included in the undergraduate and graduate syllabuses and in-service training for the school counselors are also required.

Self-help books have a certain readership profile including highly educated, wealthy, and mostly female individuals (Wilson & Cash, 2000; Bergsma, 2008). There is no scientific data at hand analyzing the readership profile of self-development books in Turkey. Yet, in accordance with the recent statistics supplied by the Turkish Statistical Institute (http://www.tuik.gov.tr/), economic welfare of Turkey is getting better; the number of the state and private universities is getting higher, and the education level of the women is getting upper. Considering these, it is quite possible to anticipate a significant raise in Turkish clients' attention to the self-help books and bibliotherapy in the close future. However, it appears that self-development and self-help book translations are probably the biggest problem for Turkey. Self-help book literature is largely dominated by translations of best-seller self-development books which have gained popularity in the world. In addition to the translations, some Turkish

authors have published books on self-development topics which belong to Western specific values such as success, power of thinking, emotional intelligence and individual-self discovery. Nonetheless, no fiction or non-fiction, original, Turkish self-help book to be employed in therapy or counseling sessions could be presently encountered in the market. For these reasons, self-help and self-development books originally written by Turkish researchers by considering the Turkish cultural values and its components are needed for personal and therapeutic uses. In effect, self-help and self-development books which are parallel with Turkish culture can assist Turkish individuals in personal and social aspects. All in all, as a novel therapeutic practice attracting the attention of counselors and psychologists, bibliotherapy seems to be a conflicting subject for all researchers as well as the Turkish ones (e.g. Keeley, Williams, & Shapiro, 2002; Paul, 2001). Regarding the number of the research at hand, it is obvious that more research should be conducted upon the usage of self-help books and effectiveness of bibliotherapy practices with Turkish participants. With the increasing number of the studies concerning bibliotherapy, it can be possible to build up a bibliotherapy model which is specific to the Turkish culture.

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