



The Mental Lens

An exploration of literature and storytelling through the lens of psychology

Issue 1

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A Note From the Editor

Welcome to The Mental Lens; a new digital psychology magazine highlighting up-to-date psychological theories and applications of literature and storytelling.

This publication is an official undertaking of Verbal, a Northern Ireland-based charity that works in partnership to enhance wellbeing across individuals and communities using a unique multi-disciplinary approach to the art of storytelling.

There is a wealth of high-quality research exploring the psychological mechanisms which underlie how we create, experience, engage with, and respond to literature. There are also many examples of evidence-based applications of reading and storytelling for therapeutic purposes. However, these studies aren't always easy to find, and in our experience, many of the insights gained from this research never reach people who work directly with literature in educational or arts-based fields. Moreover, there currently aren't any platforms where researchers and practitioners who are interested in these topics can come together to share their work and form new connections.

These observations motivated us to create an online academic magazine dedicated to the exploration of literature and storytelling through a psychological lens.

Through the Mental Lens, Verbal aims to bring together a diverse range of expert voices whose research provides insights into the psychological effects of engaging with stories in any format. We hope that by creating a dedicated space for this area of research, we will provide new opportunities for interdisciplinary connection, collaboration, and innovation between academics and practitioners. Moreover, we want to provide an accessible platform where evidence-based psychological insights can be shared with diverse audiences who work in the world of literature.

We believe this magazine can become a valuable resource for anyone with an interest in the psychology of literature and storytelling.

- Dr. Joseph Morning, Editor-in-Chief.



About the Editor:

Dr. Joseph Morning is currently the psychology manager at Verbal where he supervises the development of Storyteller; a digital parent-led biblio-therapeutic programme designed to foster resilience and emotional wellbeing in young people. Dr. Morning has a PhD in Psychology from Ulster University. His thesis explored factors involved in sub-clinical psychosis development.

Writing as Exploration

Prof Keith Oatley

In this illuminating article, author and cognitive scientist, Professor Keith Oatley explores the parallels between how we think and how we write.

Many people see writing as a chore. In some psychological discussions of how to write there are hints in this direction: first you write ... and then you rewrite. First you put down what's in your mind and then—Oh Goodness!—you have to do it all over again.

By no means everyone wants to write, but perhaps there's a way to think about it in a more inviting way. Most of us like thinking: experiencing a realization, having an idea, coming up with something we might say to someone. As a colleague and I have written: writing extends the process of thinking, enabling us to do more of it, do it in a transformed—exploratory—way. A computer screen or sheet of paper affords the possibility of externalizing a piece of consciousness: putting it out there. Once we have done this, we don't have just to keep it within our minds. We can put ourselves into the other role: reader rather than writer. We can then read what we've written, and think: "How well does that work, or might it be ... ? Then we can delete or amend it ... have a thought that is newer, maybe better: a thought we might never have had unless we had been writing.

Imagine someone engaged in writing a story or a piece of creative nonfiction. She types a sentence on her computer screen, or does some handwriting on paper. The choice of what is written will be influenced in several ways. One will derive from what this person has learned over her lifetime from reading books, and perhaps from teachers and friends. Another might derive from doing some research on what she is thinking about, with thoughts just entering her mind. Yet another will derive from reading what's already out there, on the computer screen or paper. All this can be utterly engaging. It's not just trial and error; it's exploration. Throughout the process, everything is provisional. What has been written can be thrown away, deleted, started on again. One of the things that enables writing to be engaging is that everything that one writes is not just random, and nobody else coerces or makes the writer do it.

Gustave Flaubert, one of Europe's most engaging writers of fiction proposed a rather wonderful theory of how to write, along these exploratory lines. First he

said you start with an idea. You can think and think about it for as long as you like. Perhaps his most engaging short story is "A simple heart." It is about a housemaid, Félicité, who had looked after and loved several people, all of whom died. Near the end of the story, only she and her parrot survive. At last the parrot dies. Then, in a saintly fashion, she dies as well, in a very moving scene. This short story drew on Flaubert's own childhood including ideas about maternal love, and also his experience that people who have little money can be more decent than those who have a lot. Flaubert thought about the idea for this short story for about twenty years, imagined the characters, their psychology, and a few key scenes. After you've had the idea, said Flaubert, you can jot it down—just a few notes in a form he called a "résumé." Next, when you are ready, but not before, you write scenarios, composed of thoughts, episodes, and circumstances. The story's reader will not see them. They are only for you, the writer. And if you make visits to places or do other kinds of research, the pages of scenario are places where your accounts of these go. Then, next, you start writing expanded drafts: each one with lots and lots of words, phrases, and even sentences: maybe some parts on the right side of the page and some on the left. You do more than one of these, then as you read over them you do a lot of additions and deletions, and quite a bit of moving bits about from here to there. These changes are made because you are still exploring, still having new ideas. So it isn't a matter just of putting on computer screen or paper what's in one's mind. And it isn't a matter of writing and rewriting. It is a matter of exploration in which you reach places you would never have thought of before you begin. Flaubert didn't reach the idea for the title of his story, "A simple heart," until his first expanded draft of this story. Then, at last refining drafts are written, taking perhaps just a single sentence from one page, and one from another page of the most recent expanded draft. Only now does the story start to exist, in the proper sense. Only now does the issue of style enter; it involves a further kind of exploration.

At last, after these stages, the writer can produce a manuscript that can be sent off to a publisher.

Flaubert's "A simple heart," which comes out at about 40 printed pages took Flaubert six months to write, sometimes staying up all night, in his shirt sleeves. Sometimes, in the refining drafts reading passages out loud to himself to see how they would sound. He kept previous versions, which the French call "avant-textes." These were analysed by the researcher, Raymonde Debray Genette. For this short story, at least one was lost, but twelve have survived: three resumés, three scenarios, a sub-scenario, two expanded drafts, two refining drafts, and the copyist's manuscript. The story is the result of wide explorations as the avant-textes show. It's moving, and as the protagonist dies, it may be hard for the reader not to end in tears.

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About the Author:

Keith Oatley is Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, Canada. His main research has been on emotions and the psychology of fiction. He is author of eight books of psychology, most recently *Our Minds, Our Selves*, three novels the first of which, *The Case of Emily V.*, won a Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, and a novella with psychological commentaries, *The Passionate Muse*. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society, of the Association for Psychological Science, and of the Royal Society of Canada.

Oh, what a wonderful story: Pritney as a Method supports wellbeing

Dr Pirjo Suvilehto

In this compelling article, bibliotherapist, Dr Pirjo Suvilehto discusses the development of a wellbeing programme for young people which makes use of a horse hand-puppet called Pritney to enhance engagement.

Overview of the Pritney Method

The Pritney Method (see Suvilehto 2020, Suvilehto & Keränen 2020) has been developed during my academic years in research and teaching in the Faculty of Education at the University of Oulu in Finland. Pritney focuses on practical ways of promoting narratives, emotions, psychological insight and social-emotional skills through literature and drama (puppetry). The bibliotherapeutic approach is an essential element in the Pritney method, which implements conscious literary art activities, and offers experiences to reflect on developmental issues. The theoretical background of the method consists of a framework of drama, bibliotherapy, and new ideas (posthumanism) of animals (non-humans) as co-passengers. Pritney as a tool is useful in projects and unifying work. The method may be applied with different age-groups, themes and emphases. In short, the Pritney method means interactive moments and multi-art-experiences: working with a hand puppet, reading literature and storytelling, and enjoying art activities (e.g. opera, ballet). Pritney as an animal is also a real Shetland Pony, and she brings (mainly through video greetings) a sort of animal trace to this method. In this article, I will focus on the role that bibliotherapy plays in the Pritney method, and highlight some moments and practices from Pritney sessions through case-studies, mainly focusing on cases in early childhood education..

The role of Bibliotherapy in the Pritney Method

A therapeutic approach that uses literature (poems, stories, creative writing, etc.) to support mental health, is called bibliotherapy (McCarty Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). In a children's picture book there is usually a protagonist (quite often a child or an animal/non-human character) that the child can relate to. There are also both symbolic and illustrated scenes and plots, which create moments of surprise, challenges to conquer, and the drama and excitement

of turning the page (see Suvilehto bt-test 2019a). There is an assumption that the protagonist will develop in some way during his or her 'journey' in the story. During the fictional narration, the receiver of the story will experience feelings, emotions, expectations, excitement, as well as raise questions and even gain personally meaningful insights (Suvilehto Babyreading, 2019b). Bibliotherapeutic approach with picture books, and reflections, discussions and art-activities after reading a meaningful story are safe and sensitive ways of exploring a child's current developmental issues. This may also be regarded as supporting and preventative bibliotherapy, guided by a sensitive adult, who has knowledge of bibliotherapy and conscious literature education (see Suvilehto 2020).



Research method for ethnographic field study, and data

The research material consists of two researcher mentors' experiences captured during their Pritney-visits in two day care centres, working with eight groups. 134 children and 28 adults attended the project carried out in Northern Finland for four months in 2019. The examples from the research diary (RD) are based on eight themes, in accordance with the

principles of qualitative research, and on personal choices, as is typical in new childhood studies. The central role of the animal, a pony, in the method, speaks of the study's post-humanistic principles. You could also ask, what sort of a role can a pony – albeit mostly a pony hand puppet – play in Early Childhood Education Curriculum? The project consisted of an introduction and 7 mentoring sessions for the whole group (once a week). The research mentors collected field research data using of research diaries, photos, videos, children's drawings and written feedback from the staff in day care.



Main social-emotional findings from Pritney sessions

Moments of stories and pedagogical puppet provide models and suggestions on how to create literary art activities with children. The pedagogical puppet (drama work), and sensitive stories accompanied with developmental tasks and themes (bibliotherapeutic approach) offered courage and moments of inspiration for a child. Adult's perception of the symbolic power of the puppet provide stimuli (see Scheel 2012) for the child's emotional life in the method. Encouraged by a puppet "each child participated in reading the book. The little ones sat in our arms as if we were their own adults. Everyone was holding in their arms their own beloved animal soft toy." (RD age 1-3.)

"Many were much more talkative through these puppets, especially those delicate children." (Adult, age 3-5)

"Children began to recall their own memories." (Adult, age 4-6)

Adults report, how "most wonderful it has been to see children experiencing puppets, playing, singing, performing, etc., especially animal friends (hand puppets) amaze and delight" (Adult, 1-3).



Inspired by the pony's postcards, children were eager to drop their own letters and drawings to the pony's mailbox. Their emotions are clearly seen in these messages:

"Hello Pritni. My mother is wonderful." (Letter to Pritney)

"This message is for Pritney: Always stay happy. And always be careful Pritni. You always get to the playground and you can play there. Pritni, you get to the zoo." (Letter to Pritney)

"Hey Pritney! I wanted to ask if you have balloons? What is your favorite food? In what position do you sleep?" (Letter to Pritney)

Children's activated empathy is also detected by adults:

"It is good for dolls to teach empathy (Adult, 1-3).

"I have noticed the importance of drama in learning, children get excited when the doll talks about it. The child can identify with the doll and talk to Pritney hand puppet." (Adult, 3-5)

"We have found, that soft or hand puppets are good tools for communication between a child and an

adult.” (Adult, 3–5 years)

“The animal characters have been pleasing and approachable, the songs have been catchy, and the children have learned quickly.” (Adult, 3–5)

“Transparency and encouragement observed in children in kindness” (Adult, 3–5) and “tenderness and sensitivity more in the air.” (Adult, 3–5)



Children’s drama and carefully chosen picture books encourage children to express emotions, and have discussions about emotion regulation skills with the aid of a pony puppet in day care. Emotion-related actions in challenging learning situations are conquered with the aid of a bibliotherapeutic picture book and discussions related to the chosen topic. Eight different themes explored during the project offer approaches to support a child’s growth and development in different situations in day care (see Suvilehto & Keränen 2020). Stories play important roles in helping children cope with problems and overcome challenges. Children can use connections between themselves and story characters to learn that other people face similar problems and gain inspiration for overcoming difficulties. Stories are used therapeutically in children’s lives by counselors and health practitioners, librarians, educators, and families. In bibliotherapy, stories are used to support discussions between children and caring adults about children’s concerns, and to aid the study of diverse issues that are meaningful to children’s mental health and moral

development. While stories are often used in a therapeutic way, educators and families may be unaware of bibliotherapy and the strategies that can be implemented to make the therapeutic use of books, poems, storytelling, drama, and other forms of children’s literature more intentional and successful. “Bibliotherapy’s benefits may include increased self-esteem, providing comfort, and helping children to cope with challenging situations” (see Suvilehto, 2019B Bibliotherapy-animality test, Betzalel & Shechtman 2017, Burke et al. 2004, Felder-Puig et al. 2003, Goddard 2011). In short, the benefits of the Pritney method could be seen when staff talked about valuable emotional encounters which occurred during the project. Staff highlighted children’s experiences of the bibliotherapeutic activities with the puppet pony, and the joy they bring, recalling them as follows:

“You have a good package.”

“Now there was enchantment.”

“There were significant encounters.”

“Pritney puppet’s initial greeting and closing hug creates a frame for a tight action package. Pritney instantly activates to explore ballet, opera, Sibelius boxes, professions, nursing, and children want to play after mentors’ visits.”

“There’s a lot of talk at home about Pritney pony, etc.”

“3–5-year-olds take socializing with a hand puppet as a play to slip into. They reveal things to the pony.”

(Written reflections of adults 2019.)

The children also activate the pony, and the interaction is mutual. This means that these are real encounters with the pony puppet where the children experience emotions together with the puppet in a playful and imaginative space. These experiences are both play and real for the child. The child can calm down, experience gentleness and acceptance in these encounters led by a pedagogical puppet. The staff immediately notices the impacts of these sessions: “O. and A. (toddlers) surprised us, that they felt the pony so relaxing.” And, “In the Pritney method, anything is possible for the child: Pritney and the puppeteers have been invited and welcomed to several occasions. Dolls and a literary therapeutic approach are empowering.” (Written reflections of adults 2019.)

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy as an approach in the context of early childhood education means conscious literature education, which pays attention to children's developmental competencies and their current interests. Pritney means creative, evaluative, critical, and conscious work, in which animality offers angles to study everyday manifestations, such as compassion and emotions: with conscious picture book choices and drama activities, emotions become visible. Welfare skills and active agency through the arts means also lifelong learning for channeling curiosity and emotions, strengthening interaction between children and promoting well-being. The research findings are described in the spirit of childhood studies, and post-human studies, in a non-quantitative way without the use of statistics. Instead, the focus is on a dialogue between individual expression (bibliotherapy), theory and real-life examples.

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Research Spotlight: Exploring the Benefits of Reading Aloud to Children

Tara Harkin

In this article, our staff member Tara highlights a study carried out by Professor Dominic W. Massaro which explores how reading aloud to your child can help support their own literacy acquisition.

Research has suggested that immersing your child in written language at a young age may help them learn to read in a similar way to how they learn to speak (Massaro, 2012). One way of immersing your child in written language is by reading stories aloud to them. Massaro points out that reading to your child is a widely recommended practice for parents and caregivers who wish to give their young child a head start on the road to literacy acquisition. These recommendations often point to a range of benefits associated with the practice including increased cognitive skills and the opportunity to stimulate language development. While this appears to be a sound recommendation on its surface, the potential mechanism linking being read to and learning how to read yourself is not immediately clear. Picture books seem to be the most common way of reading aloud to children, as such books contain large engaging pictures accompanied by appropriate text. One study that tracked the eye movements of children whilst reading picture books found that 95% of the time the child was concentrating on pictures alone (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005). This means that while the language in the story has a written source, the child is experiencing it as spoken language, which they already encounter in their daily lives outside of the bedtime story activity. It is therefore unlikely that being read to is supporting children's language acquisition by making them more familiar with the processes involved in reading written text.

These observations prompted Massaro to investigate what added benefits children are getting from hearing written language that they are not getting from hearing other forms of spoken language. He turned his attention to the cognitive and linguistic differences between written and spoken language. Research tells us that the earlier a child is exposed to new words, the more familiar they become with their understanding and productive use (Petrova, Gaskell, & Ferrand, 2011). Massaro predicted that children's books contain more varied and sophisticated language compared to spoken

language, and that exposure to this more complex vocabulary may explain why reading to your child can help them learn how to read themselves.

To test his prediction, Massaro examined the vocabulary content of picture books, and compared this to a database of child directed speech (CDS) and a database of adult directed speech (ADS), to help determine how language differs between written and spoken language. The vocabulary was also examined within these three databases to identify the number of word types within them. To determine the properties of this additional vocabulary, the samples were assessed against the 5,000 most frequently used spoken and written words from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 1990-2012). The first analysis produced an average grade reading level score for each of the databases. In line with his predictions, the picture book database yielded higher levels of reading than both CDS and ADS, the average reading level score for picture books was 4.2, whereas CDS and ADS scored an average of 1.9 and 3.0 respectively. When the presence of different word-types within each of the databases was analysed, up to three times as many rare word types were found in picture books compared to Child Directed speech. This means that children who listen to a reading aloud of a picture book are roughly three times more likely to experience a new word type that is not among the most frequently written or spoken words.

The findings of Massaro's study were in line with his predictions, demonstrating that picture books contain more complex language compared to adult or child-directed speech. The author pointed out that this finding isn't that surprising. Written and spoken language differ because they serve different purposes. Speech is responsive and in the moment, working best when more basic and familiar words are used because the intentions being conveyed by the speaker often need to be quickly and easily understood. Written language is not subject to the same restrictions. It is unresponsive and a more complex and extensive

dialogue can therefore be used. These findings suggest that being read aloud to may help children learn how to read by exposing them to more sophisticated language. It is less about the difference in language modalities but rather the complexity of the language they encounter from such books that they would not usually experience in everyday life. One important note made by the author is that despite the higher levels of complexity found in the language of picture books, children rarely have problems understanding picture books.

The findings from Massaro's study underscores the value of reading aloud to your child and also sheds light on children's capacity for understanding sophisticated language. It would appear that the time-honoured ritual of the bedtime story is here to stay.

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Research Spotlight: Using Bibliotherapy to Foster Mental Health Literacy in Schools

Áine Ní Chnáimhsí

In this article, our staff member Áine highlights an article written by Jayna Mumbauer and Viki Kelchner (2017) which discusses how mental health literacy could help prevent and treat mental health issues in school settings.

Research demonstrates that there is a high prevalence of mental health disorders in the general population (Merikangas et al., 2010). Young people spend a significant portion of their lives in formal education, making schools an important setting where prevention and treatment strategies for mental health issues can be implemented. School systems already play an important role in caring for the mental health of their students, however as the authors point out, school counsellors are usually overstretched and only 1 in 5 young people with a diagnosable mental health disorder receive the treatment they need (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2007). In their article, Mumbauer and Kelchner propose that schools could help to address the mental health needs of their students through preventative and educational initiatives that focus on improving mental health literacy.

Mental health literacy can be described as 'knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid in their recognition, management, or prevention' (Jorm, 2000). The construct provides a simple framework that can be used to develop prevention and early intervention programmes for young people. Mental health literacy can be broken down into 3 key areas of learning. The first focuses on building an understanding of psychological distress and specific psychological disorders. Here, the goal is to be able to recognise the signs and symptoms of disorders such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Having a clear understanding of mental wellness is also an important aspect of learning in this area. By learning to identify the different manifestations of mental illness, an individual will have an increased ability to recognise a personal need for care if it arises.

The second learning area focuses on building an understanding of the causes and risk factors associated with mental health problems. Learning about the different biological, social, and psychological factors which can play a role in the development of poor mental health makes it easier to take preventative action before a mental health disorder develops. Teaching young people about the causes of mental

illness can also help to reduce the stigma attached to mental health disorders. Reducing stigma can ultimately make it easier to seek help and engage in treatment.

The third learning area focuses on building an awareness of how mental health problems can be treated. In contrast to the previous area, here the goal is to learn about the cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors which can play a role in the development of positive mental health. Building an awareness of the different paths to accessing treatment is also important here. Being aware of how mental health issues can be addressed can empower people to develop effective coping behaviours as well as encourage help-seeking.

Evidence clearly demonstrates that boosting mental health literacy can have a positive impact on mental health. The next question is how can the lessons of mental health literacy be integrated into the school setting? For this, Mumbauer and Kelchner turned their attention to bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is the name given to a range of approaches which use storytelling or reading to help achieve therapeutic change. Bibliotherapeutic interventions have been found to be effective in the prevention and treatment of emotional, physical, and mental health problems among a wide range of populations, including children with autism (Scattone, Wilczynski, Edwards, & Rabian, 2002), LGBTQ youth (Frank & Cannon, 2009), individuals presenting with anxiety (Cobham, 2012), depression (Gregory, Schwer Canning, Lee, & Wise, 2004), and aggression (Shechtman, 2006).

The authors discuss 2 main advantages of the bibliotherapeutic approach which makes it a strong vehicle for the delivery of mental health literacy education in school settings. The first advantage of bibliotherapy is the broad scope of its content. Self-help manuals informed by evidence-based therapeutic techniques can expose young people to new emotion management and coping techniques in

engaging and accessible ways. Books can also be used to encourage young people to challenge negative ways of thinking and view their thoughts more objectively. The narratives contained literature can introduce students to diverse and relatable characters from different backgrounds and environmental pressures. These stories can encourage young people to consider different perspectives and build empathy.

The second advantage of bibliotherapy is its versatility. Mumbauer and Kelchner outline a number of ways that therapeutic literature could be integrated into the school setting. School counsellors could deliver bibliotherapy with students either on an individual or group basis. Literature content could be used as an auxiliary support for young people engaging in counselling. Thematically relevant and age-appropriate stories could be read in the classroom as part of a mental health curriculum for all students. Bibliotherapy literature can also be brought home, allowing the caregiver to work with the school to care for the young person's wellbeing. Stories with mental health themes can even be used in peer-reading programmes, strengthening bonds between students.

Mumbauer and Kelchner's article makes a strong case for introducing mental health literacy education into school settings. Their proposal to use bibliotherapy as the delivery model for this education is an exciting one, providing an opportunity to create connected psychoeducation curriculums which foster our young people's mental health by involving their teachers, school counsellors, caregivers, and peers.

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