

Bibliotherapeutic Potential of Autobiographical Narratives: Analysis of a Manuscript by a Person with Muscular Dystrophy

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Abstract This study examines the bibliotherapy potential of autobiographical narratives using the manuscript “When the Soul Speaks”, which is currently in the process of being developed. The work analyzes how the personal narrative of a person with muscular dystrophy can serve as a therapeutic tool not only for the author himself but also for readers with a similar experience. The research is grounded in the theoretical concepts of bibliotherapy, autobiographical memory, and narrative identity. Methodologically, it is based on a qualitative analysis of available parts of the text with an emphasis on identifying key therapeutic elements. The results show that even an unfinished autobiographical narrative can significantly contribute to the process of coping with a chronic illness, building resilience, and finding meaning in challenging life situations.

Keywords bibliotherapy, autobiographical narrative, muscular dystrophy, coping strategies, identity reconstruction

1. INTRODUCTION

Bibliotherapy, a therapeutic method that utilizes reading and writing for therapeutic purposes, has been gaining increasing attention from the professional community in recent decades. A special place in this context is occupied by autobiographical narratives of people with chronic illnesses or disabilities, which can serve as a bridge between personal experience and broader social understanding. This study focuses on the analysis of the manuscript “When the Soul Speaks”, which represents an autobiographical narrative of a person with muscular dystrophy.

A notable aspect of this study is that the manuscript under analysis remains unfinished. This circumstance, however, does not constitute an obstacle to the research but, on the contrary, offers a unique opportunity to explore the bibliotherapy potential of the text during its creation. As Rubery (2022) notes, the writing process can be as important as the final product, especially in the context of therapeutic writing. The unfinished nature of the manuscript is a reflection of its authentic quality, reflecting the ongoing nature of coping with a chronic illness.

The research aims to identify and analyze bibliotherapy elements in this narrative and assess their potential benefits for both the author and readers with a similar experience. The study asks the following research questions:

What bibliotherapy elements can be identified in the accessible parts of the autobiographical narrative of a person with muscular dystrophy? How does the process of autobiographical writing contribute to coping with a chronic illness? How can even an unfinished narrative be utilized in the context of formal or informal bibliotherapy?

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach that uses reading and writing to achieve positive changes in an individual's thinking, emotions, and behavior. Isawi, Gavin, and Wickman (2025) define bibliotherapy as the purposeful use of literature to promote mental health and personal growth. The authors emphasize that bibliotherapy can be an effective tool for developing self-awareness, empathy, and resilience. In the context of working with individuals who have chronic illnesses or disabilities, bibliotherapy assumes particular significance. As Cossali and Rampani (2023) state, writing can serve as a means of processing traumatic experiences, building a positive identity, and finding meaning in challenging life situations. The authors emphasize that writing one's own story allows an individual to gain distance from their experience and see it from a new perspective.

Autobiographical memory is a specific type of episodic memory that involves memories of personal experiences and events from one's own life. Raeder, Clayton, and Boeckle (2023) emphasize in their meta-analysis that narrative processing of autobiographical memories can have a significant therapeutic effect, especially for people with traumatic experiences. The concept of narrative identity, as described by Nicholes (2022), is based on the assumption that people construct their identity through the stories they tell about themselves. These stories help integrate diverse experiences into a coherent whole, giving life meaning and continuity. In the case of people with chronic illness, narrative reconstruction of identity can represent an important adaptation mechanism.

An interesting perspective for our study is offered by research into the therapeutic potential of unfinished narratives. As Leese, Crouthamel, and Köhne (2021) suggest, unfinished or fragmentary narratives may reflect the nature of traumatic experience, which often defies linear narrative and closure. The authors argue that the “openness” of such texts may paradoxically better capture the complexity and unfinished nature of the process of coping with trauma or chronic illness. Rolston (2021) emphasizes in her analysis

of autobiographical texts that the process of writing itself can have a therapeutic effect, regardless of whether the text is completed. The author notes that writing as a process can be as important as writing as a product. This notion is particularly relevant to our analysis of the unfinished manuscript, where we can observe the therapeutic potential of the autobiographical writing process itself.

A study by Hanáková et al. (2024) on the self-concept of individuals with neuromuscular diseases revealed that those with muscular dystrophy exhibit distinct patterns of self-evaluation across various life domains. The study, which included 29 respondents with neuromuscular diseases, revealed that the highest average score was recorded in the area of social adaptability (55.76 points), while the lowest was in the area of physical appearance (39.17 points). These findings suggest that individuals with neuromuscular diseases tend to perceive themselves as well-adapted in social situations yet may experience lower satisfaction with their physical appearance. The study also showed slightly below-average ratings in the area of meaning and self-actualization (average 45.69 points), which may indicate that respondents feel some limitations in their possibilities for self-actualization and fulfillment of life goals. These findings are relevant to our analysis of the autobiographical narrative of a person with muscular dystrophy, as they provide a broader context for understanding the psychosocial aspects of life with this disease.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative research design using narrative analysis was chosen. This approach enables an in-depth examination of the meanings, structures, and functions of autobiographical narratives (Kuiken & Jacobs, 2021). Narrative analysis focuses on how people construct and interpret their experiences through stories, making it a suitable method for exploring the potential of bibliotherapy in autobiographical texts.

The primary research material is the unfinished manuscript “When the Soul Speaks”, which is an autobiographical narrative of a person with muscular dystrophy.

The manuscript's available parts comprise six chapters that capture key moments of the author's life, from childhood to adulthood, with a special emphasis on the experience of living with a progressive neuromuscular disease. The text combines chronological narration with reflective passages and also features interactive elements, including a space for the reader's affirmations at the end of each chapter. The fact that the manuscript is unfinished was taken into account in the methodological approach. The analysis focused not only on the content of the available parts but also on identifying potential directions for further development of the text and its therapeutic potential in its current, incomplete form.

Data analysis was conducted in three phases: thematic analysis, structural analysis, and functional analysis. Through thematic analysis, we first extracted the main themes from the text. These include, for example, love and relationships, acceptance of fate, family heritage, finding meaning in life, loss and death, strength and resilience, working with energy, appreciating beauty in everyday life, discovering a life path, and cultivating gratitude. Each theme is briefly described and illustrated by its manifestation in the text.

In the structural analysis, we focused on the formal division of the text. Through functional analysis, we ultimately identified the primary functions of the individual parts of the text. The text fulfills the following functions: emotional (expresses feelings and emotions), motivational (inspires the reader), therapeutic (helps to process difficult emotions), informative (explains facts), aesthetic

(uses poetic means), appellative (calls the reader to action), and reflective (stimulates thought).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Thematic analysis

Several key thematic areas have been identified in the manuscript “When the Soul Speaks” that have significant bibliotherapy potential:

4.1.1 Accepting the diagnosis and coping with disease progression

The text captures the process of accepting a diagnosis of muscular dystrophy from both the author's and her parents' perspectives. Particularly impressive are the passages describing the different perceptions of the disease by the child and the parents:

“I looked at him with a slight smile that bordered on mockery. It was strange to see my dad so broken when, to me, the disease was something as natural as breathing. 'What are you talking about, Dad?' I said with sincere incomprehension. To me, muscular dystrophy was simply a part of life, something I was born with, even if it did not manifest until later.”

This excerpt illustrates an important psychological phenomenon: a child with a congenital or early acquired disability does not perceive his condition as a loss but as normality. This insight can be valuable for both parents of children with disabilities and professionals working with this target group.

4.1.2 Transforming vulnerability into strength

A significant theme of the manuscript is the transformation of apparent weakness into strength. The author repeatedly describes how the experience of living with limitations taught her to see value in aspects of life that she might otherwise overlook:

“Failures became my daily reality, but I learned to see them differently. They were not just moments of weakness, but opportunities to meet, to break down barriers between people, to create moments of authentic connection.”

This transformation motif corresponds to the concept of posttraumatic growth, which describes positive psychological changes resulting from coping with highly challenging life circumstances (Raeder, Clayton & Boeckle, 2023).

4.1.3 The search for meaning and the spiritual dimension

The text contains a strong spiritual dimension, especially in the chapter “When the Soul Speaks”, which describes a transcendental experience during craniosacral therapy:

“I feel tears running down my face, mixing with the amniotic fluid. 'But what should I do?' 'You just BE and create,' he says with infinite love. 'Spread joy and do what makes you and others happy!’”

This passage illustrates how autobiographical writing can serve as a means of articulating and integrating spiritual experiences into a

personal narrative, thereby contributing to finding deeper meaning in challenging life situations.

4.2 Structural analysis

4.2.1 Narrative structure and temporal organization

The manuscript combines a chronological narrative with reflective passages that offer more profound insight into the author's inner world. This structure allows the reader to follow not only external events but also the internal process of coping with the illness and its integration into the author's identity.

The alternation of time planes is particularly effective, as the author connects childhood memories with reflections from the perspective of adulthood:

"Today, when I am forty-one, I look back and see what a difficult journey my parents had to go through. From the initial shock and denial, through the search for miracle healers, to the final acceptance of reality."

This narrative strategy enables both the author and the reader to gain distance from immediate experience and view it within the broader context of the life story.

4.2.2 Interactive elements

A significant structural element of the manuscript is the interactive passages at the end of each chapter, which invite readers to formulate their affirmations:

"Space for your affirmation: 'I accept my life as it is, with all its challenges and gifts. Every day is a new opportunity to see beauty even in the most difficult moments.'"

This element transforms passive reading into an active process of self-reflection, significantly enhancing the therapeutic effect of the text. As Isawi, Gavin, and Wickman (2025) state, active reader engagement is a key factor in the effectiveness of bibliotherapy interventions.

4.3 Functional analysis

A functional analysis of the manuscript "When the Soul Speaks" revealed that the text fulfills several therapeutic functions, both for the author herself and potentially for readers with similar life experiences.

4.3.1 Therapeutic functions for the author

The text demonstrates that autobiographical writing is a crucial therapeutic tool for the author. Writing allows her to integrate the challenging experiences associated with a progressive illness into a coherent life story, which can contribute to better coping with and accepting this life challenge. Through storytelling, the author reconstructs her identity in a way that incorporates the illness as a significant part of her life, yet it is not entirely defined by it. This process of narrative identity reconstruction may be significant for people with chronic illness, as it helps them build a self-concept that is not reduced to the role of the patient.

Another important therapeutic aspect of writing is its potential for finding and articulating meaning in a life with limitations. The text reflects the author's search for and discovery of meaning in challenging life situations, which aligns with Frankl's concept of the "will to meaning." This existential dimension of autobiographical writing can be a valuable source of resilience and well-being in the face of chronic illness.

Ultimately, writing enables the author to share her experiences with others, which can contribute to a sense of meaning and social connectedness. Knowing that her story can be a source of inspiration and comfort for others can strengthen the author's sense of belonging and give her experience a transcendent meaning.

4.3.2 Potential therapeutic functions for readers

Even in its unfinished form, the manuscript of "When the Soul Speaks" has the potential to serve several therapeutic functions for readers, especially those who have similar experiences with chronic illness or disability.

Readers with similar life experiences may find confirmation in the text that their emotions and reactions are normal and shared by others. This process of identification and normalization can be especially valuable in the context of rare diseases, where a patient may feel lonely and isolated with their diagnosis. Finding that their experiences resonate with those of someone else can bring significant relief and a sense of belonging.

The text also provides models of adaptive ways to cope with chronic illness. The author's coping strategies, attitudes, and values can serve as inspiration and a source of practical ideas for readers facing similar challenges. The author's story of living a whole and meaningful life despite a serious illness can be a source of hope and motivation for others.

Finally, the interactive elements of the text, such as passages that invite readers to formulate their affirmations, encourage the reader's self-reflection and active engagement in the therapeutic process. These elements transform passive reading into an active process of self-exploration and personal growth, significantly enhancing the therapeutic potential of the text.

Overall, the manuscript "When the Soul Speaks" represents a valuable bibliotherapy tool that can contribute to better coping and acceptance of chronic illness, identity reconstruction, finding meaning, and strengthening social connections. Its incompleteness not only does not diminish its therapeutic potential but may, on the contrary, reflect the authentic nature of the experience of living with a progressive illness.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that "accepting fate" is the most common theme in the text, indicating a strong motif of coping with life's challenges.

Topic	Number of occurrences
Love and relationships	9
Accepting fate	32
Family heritage	8
Searching for meaning	12

Loss and death	12
Strength and durability	10
Working with energy	4
Beauty in everyday life	21
Finding a way	11
Spiritual wisdom	9

Table 1: Frequency of theme occurrence in the manuscript „When the Soul Speaks“

The following table presents the topic with examples of individual statements.

Topic	Sample
Love and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •And sometimes true love is not the one that dazzles you at first sight, but the one that gradually, day after day, transforms you into a better person. •Love comes in many forms and often from unexpected directions. •And now, as Armstrong's voice sang about how beautiful this world was, I felt that Dad, even though he had decided to end his life, saw the world as a place full of beauty, trees, and even though he was gone, his love for life and nature was genuine and deep.
Accepting fate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •None of us have any idea what cards fate will deal us. •We were both suddenly faced with the same diagnosis, as if fate had decided that it wouldn't let us go through this hell gradually, but would strike all at once, full force. •That even if fate takes away our ability to run, it cannot take away our ability to love.
Family heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Memories of grandparents have a special ability - they are like old photographs that do not lose their color over time, but instead acquire new shades that we were unable to perceive as children. •Grandparents are like trees - their roots reach deep into the past, their branches provide shade on the hot days of life, and their fruits nourish future generations. •Our most valuable heritage is not in what our grandparents left us materially, but in the values they passed on to us.
Searching for meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Because fate has a sense of irony, and sometimes the best teachers come in a guise you least expect. •What's the point? •But in that special space between waking and dreaming that craniosacral therapy opened up, I received an answer that was neither logical nor rational, yet made perfect sense: "Because I like it when everything is not the same."
Loss and death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •That for us it is not a loss, but simply life, as it is. •The loss of a child, and then the diagnosis of two more. •Every loss reminds me how precious life is and how important it is to live it to the fullest.

Strength and durability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •That strength is not in our muscles, but in our spirit. •And perhaps its strength lies in this simplicity. •Every fall was like a moment of helplessness, when I was at the mercy of circumstances and the people around me.
Working with energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I had this profound experience during craniosacral therapy, which I tried as part of comprehensive care for my body. •Craniosacral therapy works with the subtle rhythm of cerebrospinal fluid that pulsates around the brain and spinal cord. •During therapy, I entered a state that I would describe as deep meditation.
Beauty in everyday life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It wasn't the beauty of a movie star, but a kind of essence that attracted me internally. •You can write here a positive thought that came to you while reading, a personal encouragement for days when it's hard to find strength, gratitude for something life has given you, wisdom gained from your own experience, or a promise to yourself about how you want to approach life's challenges. •I also felt gratitude.
Finding a way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It is the journey of one girl, a woman who was born with a body that decided to go its own way. •A path that has not always been straight or easy, but which has led me here – to the moment when I can share my thoughts with you. •It was not a straight or easy path, but it led them to understand that even with illness, one can live a dignified and fulfilling life, that a person's value lies not in how fast they can run, but in what they carry in their heart.
Spiritual wisdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •These are words I would have liked to have told them back then, if I had the wisdom I have today. •You can write here a positive thought that came to you while reading, a personal encouragement for days when it's hard to find strength, gratitude for something life has given you, wisdom gained from your own experience, or a promise to yourself about how you want to approach life's challenges. •Their wisdom is not that they have all the answers, but that they know how to live with questions.

Table 2: Examples of statements for individual themes in the manuscript „When the Soul Speaks“

The results of the manuscript analysis, "When the Soul Speaks," confirm the significant potential for bibliotherapy in autobiographical narratives from individuals with chronic illnesses. This potential manifests itself on several levels.

The process of autobiographical writing can serve as an effective tool for processing traumatic experiences and reconstructing identity. As Raeder, Clayton, and Boeckle (2023) suggest, the narrative processing of autobiographical memories can significantly contribute to the integration of challenging life events into a coherent life story. In the analyzed manuscript, this process is particularly evident in passages where the author reflects on her experience with the progression of the disease and transforms it into an opportunity for personal growth.

Autobiographical narratives serve as a bridge between personal experience and broader societal understanding. Franssen (2020) emphasizes that personal narratives about the experience of chronic

illness can contribute to destigmatization and raising awareness about living with the condition. The manuscript "When the Soul Speaks" offers a genuine insight into life with muscular dystrophy, which can be valuable for both the lay public and professionals working with this target group.

Interactive elements in the manuscript that invite readers to formulate their affirmations represent an innovative approach to bibliotherapy. This approach transforms passive reading into an active process of self-reflection, significantly enhancing the therapeutic effect of the text. As Isawi, Gavin, and Wickman (2025) state, active reader engagement is a key factor in the effectiveness of bibliotherapy interventions.

The results of this study have several practical implications. For clinical practice, supporting autobiographical writing can be a valuable component of psychosocial interventions for individuals with chronic illnesses. For the education of professionals in helping professions, autobiographical texts can serve as an authentic source of information about the subjective experience of living with a given illness. Ultimately, for the broader public, such texts can contribute to a deeper understanding and destigmatization of chronic illness and disability.

However, several limitations of this study should be noted. The analysis focused on a single autobiographical text, which limits the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the assessment of the therapeutic potential of the text was based on theoretical analysis, without empirical verification of its actual effects on the reader. Future research could focus on empirically examining the effects of reading autobiographical texts on the psychological well-being of readers with similar experiences.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the potential of bibliotherapy through autobiographical narratives, utilizing the manuscript "When the Soul Speaks". The analysis revealed that the text contains several elements with significant therapeutic potential, including themes of accepting a diagnosis, transforming vulnerability into strength, and searching for meaning. Structural analysis highlighted the effective use of narrative strategies and interactive elements that can enhance the therapeutic impact of the text.

The results suggest that autobiographical writing can serve as an effective tool for processing traumatic experiences, reconstructing identity, and finding meaning in life with a chronic illness. At the same time, such writing can also serve as an important therapeutic function for readers, especially those who have had similar experiences.

These findings support the broader use of autobiographical writing and reading in the context of formal and informal bibliotherapy, while also highlighting the value of personal narratives as authentic sources of information about the subjective experience of living with a chronic illness or disability.

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