

Institution: University of Leeds
Unit of Assessment: D29
Title of case study: Applying a new model of bibliotherapy to improve the mental well-being of asylum seekers and refugees
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Durrant's research on the therapeutic potential of literature as a way of working through trauma led to the creation of a unique model of bibliotherapy. The application of this model within three Leeds and Bradford organisations had significant impact on the mental well-being of asylum seekers and refugees and increased the capacity for organisations to provide effective and sustainable therapeutic services. The success of these initiatives led to further public and third-sector collaborations and the model being adopted by a range of health, education, public and charitable organisations both nationally and internationally.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Since his appointment to Leeds in 2000, Durrant's research has concerned literature as a way of working through trauma in dealing with the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and other racial oppression. In a monograph and article [1, 2], he showed how literature creates community not by transcending racial difference but by memorialising the histories of racism that continue to structure social relations. This led him, in [3] and [4], to a reconsideration of two terms key to both literary and clinical approaches to trauma: empathy and identification. Durrant showed how relative positions of power place limits on the ability to empathise. While literature cannot grant unlimited access to the minds of others, it can make us aware of bodily suffering. He proposed that, by bringing readers into proximity with physical suffering, literature produces a form of compassionate solidarity Durrant termed 'corporeal community' [6].</p> <p>A favourable review of Durrant's book in <i>Modern Fiction Studies</i> (51.3, Fall 2005) asked how the literary production of a sense of community translated into the formation of actual communities. As a response to this question and building on examples of bibliotherapy practice (broadly defined as 'using books for therapy'), Durrant developed a model that addressed the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees. He contested the psychoanalytic distinction between a healthy process of 'working through,' in which traumatic experiences are consciously remembered and verbalised; and a pathological process of 'acting out,' in which experiences are unconsciously repeated through actions. Durrant established the possibility of an unconscious process of working through, in which traumatic experience is approached indirectly: positive shifts in emotional life can unconsciously take place through the aesthetic experience of imaginatively 'acting out' other people's lives. This distinguished Durrant's model of bibliotherapy, both from counselling models which primarily emphasise the importance of telling one's own story, and other forms of bibliotherapy such as Books on Prescription which advocate the reading alone of books on directly relevant content (e.g. self-help manuals).</p> <p>Durrant's bibliotherapy stresses the therapeutic benefits of communal reading and the importance of the form, rather than the content, of the literary work. Literature produces a sense of corporeal community, firstly because the readers are physically collected in a group, and secondly because the texts are given a physical presence by being read aloud. Durrant's model foregrounds this communal, performative dimension as crucial to literature's therapeutic value, especially in overcoming the isolation at the heart of many refugees' experience. As he argued in an article on a pilot group studied over a two-year period [5], the therapeutically crucial identification is not with what happens to particular characters within a narrative but with the formal act of narration itself. This study demonstrated that reading aloud enables participants to learn how to narrate and give meaningful shape to their own lives, with novels in the first person and lyric poetry having proved particularly effective as therapeutic texts.</p>

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3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All journal articles are peer-reviewed; essays appearing in books were edited by leading trauma, psychoanalytic and postcolonial academics. Items 1-4 were included in RAE 2008. Based on the strength and relevance of this research, Durrant has been invited to give presentations at 15 national and international conferences and symposia. All references to works by Durrant.

- 1] *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris and Toni Morrison*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. Over 1,000 copies sold. Strong sales of hardback edition and positive reviews in international journals led to paperback and electronic versions in 2006. Publication prompted invitation from the Flemish Academic Centre for Advanced Studies (VLAC) in Brussels for Durrant to join their Trauma Studies Research Centre on fully-funded Fellowship in 2009. Available on request.
- 2] 'The Invention of Mourning in Postapartheid Literature' *Third World Quarterly* 26.3 (2005), Special Issue: *Connecting Cultures*, ed Emma Bainbridge: 441-450. DOI:10.1080/01436590500033701.
- 3] 'J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination.' In *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Ed Jane Poyner. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. 118-34. Available on request.
- 4] 'Father, Can't You See I'm Burning?' Trauma, Ethics and the Real in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.' In *Culture and the Unconscious*. Ed Michael Rustin, Caroline Bainbridge, Candida Yates and Susannah Radstone. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007. 130-149. Available on request.
- 5] 'Reading Asylum: Tweyambe! (Let's help each other!).' *Moving Worlds* 11.2 (2012), Special Issue: Asylum Accounts: 44-57. Available on request.
- 6] Editor, with Gert Beulens and Robert Eaglestone. *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. Includes essay by Durrant, 'Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning,' 91-109. Publication emerged from VLAC Fellowship where Durrant worked with Beulens, Eaglestone and other leading specialists in Trauma Studies. Available on request.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Durrant's bibliotherapy was applied in collaboration with a psychotherapist at Leeds refugee charity SOLACE. From January 2010 to December 2011, one group of 6 refugees attended weekly 2-hour sessions. Following the success of this pilot, four new groups of 4-8 refugees were set up: with SOLACE (December 2012-present); Student Action for Refugees (STAR, February 2012-present); Bradford Libraries (February 2013-present); and the Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Development Council (ECSEDC, April 2013-present). Durrant acts as primary advisor for all groups, which are led by graduate volunteers with literary and/or mental health expertise. Feedback from participants and staff has evidenced the positive impact on well-being of refugees (i), with the result that Durrant's model has been adopted by a number of public and charitable refugee organisations (ii).

i) The impact on the well-being of the refugees

Durrant's bibliotherapy allowed participating refugees and asylum seekers to work through common feelings of depression and anxiety. The Clinical Manager of SOLACE reported that the groups have been successful in improving mental health 'by addressing issues common to asylum seekers such as difficulty with concentration, memory, anxiety, and confusion'. In particular, Durrant's emphasis on the act of reading out loud literary texts in a group environment had given participants 'the opportunity to reflect on and process their experiences, to put words to them and gain authority over them' [E].

Bibliotherapy helped group members cope with the 'psychological torture' of asylum seeking. One

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participant noted the beneficial effects of becoming 'deeply absorbed in the literary works and intrigued by the characters,' while another reflected that reading and discussing poems 'helps release us from our anger and abstract [sic] us from our grief.' Reading about surviving racial discrimination offered one member 'hope and courage [to] rise again from a period of wastage, damage and hurt.' In the most powerfully evidential case, a refugee who had been threatened with repatriation was brought out of a panic attack simply by focusing on the auditory rhythm of a poem being read aloud [A].

Collectively empathising with literary characters and themes together allowed members to form a community that served as an antidote to the isolating experience of seeking asylum in the UK. The shared act of entering into fictional worlds prompted one refugee to describe her group as a 'new family' that 'helps me have the sense of belonging.' The group accordingly renamed itself 'Tweyambe!', a Lugandan expression meaning 'let's help each other!' Forming community not only restored refugees' confidence, it inspired them to see how they might contribute to British society. Having been granted asylum, 75% of the pilot group have now entered training as foster parents, teaching assistants, or nurses. As one refugee remarked, identification with a fictional character caused her to 'think of ways of helping the British community' [A].

In response to readings, members are also encouraged to produce their own poetry in creative writing group sessions, and this has improved their written and spoken communication skills. The STAR group facilitator reported that 'the continual dialogue, increasing our understanding of each other's work, has led to [...] members seeing the reading group as a complementary "intermediate group" to the general conversation classes.' One member commented that 'every single class has helped us understand more about how to write and speak.' Participants recommended bibliotherapy to other refugees who are struggling with English [B]. By improving English literacy skills, participants were in an improved position to complete job applications and seek employment. At the same time, these poems have helped to raise public awareness of the ill treatment of asylum seekers. Members have performed their poetry at public events such as 'Leeds: City of Sanctuary' (May 2011) and have published poems in journals such as *Moving Worlds*, the webpages of refugee organisations (e.g. <http://solace-uk.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/by-banks-of-river-asylum.html>), and as part of a Refugee Week poster display.

ii) The imbedding of Durrant's model of bibliotherapy within partner institutions

- SOLACE is convinced of the long-term benefits of bibliotherapy and has now adopted it as the primary form of group therapy at their counselling and advocacy centre [E]. This has in turn led refugees to view the organisation not just in terms of access to services but as a base for community. The Clinical Manager of SOLACE, who also acts as an advisor to similar organisations, now recommends the model as a 'sustainable... effective [and] adaptable therapeutic practice [that] facilitates the building of connections and community in ways that our other groups and services do not.' Following a halving of SOLACE's funding in 2013, a decision was made to maintain the bibliotherapy group by entering into partnership with RETAS, a refugee education, training and advice centre [E].
- STAR National Executive received a detailed report from Leeds STAR leader recommending the formation of new groups across the UK [B].
- A consultant working for the ECSEDC in South Africa used Durrant's bibliotherapy to recover the empathetic capacity of development professionals dealing with a legacy of trauma. The group functions both as 'a site of empathetic identification between colleagues' and as 'a dialectical engagement with the socio-historical context that they must address in the work that they do' [D].
- In May 2013 Durrant demonstrated his bibliotherapy at the National School for Child and Adolescent Therapy to an audience of 50 people, of whom the majority were practising clinicians. In feedback 86% found the lecture interesting/inspiring for their work and 36% stated that it would influence their clinical/professional practice. The event coordinator

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observed that, while bibliotherapy was new to most attendees, the presentation convinced them of it as an effective form of treatment [G].

- After witnessing the success of the SOLACE group, the Streatham Drop-In Centre for Asylum Seekers and Refugees applied for funding to start a group [H].
- A presentation by Durrant as part of Refugee Week 2013 led to the Leeds City of Sanctuary Movement to consider bibliotherapy to help schools attain the 'School of Sanctuary Award' (award for promoting positive attitudes towards people seeking sanctuary) [I].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**Copies of all transcripts, reports and materials available on request*

- A] Annual questionnaires completed by refugees in the SOLACE and STAR groups, July 2011, 2012 and 2013.
- B] Report on Student Action for Refugees group, submitted to the National Executive, July 2013.
- C] Report from Bradford Libraries, July 2013.
- D] Report from Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Development Council Consultant, July 2013.
- E] Transcript of interviews with Clinical Manager of SOLACE, November 2012 and July 2013.
- F] Feedback questionnaires from NSCAP lecture audience members, March 2013.
- G] Transcript of interview with lecture respondent and Programme Manager, Foundation Course in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy and Inter-Cultural Psychodynamic Therapy, NSCAP, July 2013.
- H] Report from Chair of the Streatham Drop-In Centre for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, July 2013.
- I] Report from Leeds Schools of Sanctuary Coordinator, July 2013.