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## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SENIOR ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONNECTEDNESS AFTER BIBLIOTHERAPY

Rebecca E. Fisher  
*Southeastern University - Lakeland*

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SENIOR ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF CONNECTEDNESS AFTER BIBLIOTHERAPY

By

REBECCA E. FISHER

A doctoral dissertation submitted to the  
College of Education  
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OF CONNECTEDNESS AFTER BIBLIOTHERAPY

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REBECCA E. FISHER

Dissertation Approved:

*Patty LeBlanc, Ph.D.*

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Patty LeBlanc, PhD, Dissertation Chair

*Janet Deck*

---

Janet Deck, EdD, Committee Member

*Lisa Ciganek*

---

Lisa Ciganek, EdD, Committee Member

*Lisa A. Coscia*

---

Lisa Coscia, EdD, Dean, College of Education

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, an early believer in bibliotherapy. As an avid reader, she has often guided me to just the right book throughout my life. I also dedicate this work to my father, an enduring supporter of higher education and lifelong learning. I sincerely appreciate my husband, who has been a continual source of encouragement. His willingness to help when needed has been a blessing. I am thankful for my children, Hillary, Grayson, and Leslie Anne, who have been interested and caring throughout the dissertation process. Emily, who joined us a bit later, I also appreciate your curiosity regarding my dissertation and wish you every blessing in your future academic endeavors. I praise God for the gift of His son Jesus and for the words of hope and healing within the greatest text of all, The Bible.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. The research question was "What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy?" To explore the research question, a virtual book study was conducted via Zoom. Seven retired adults took part in the virtual book study and were interviewed at the end of the study. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of connectedness among participants of the virtual book study; interview responses were distilled to core meanings. Analysis of the interview data resulted in three major themes: connection to self, connection to others, and connection to the book/author. Key points gleaned from the study resulted in the formation of a model designed to guide future virtual book studies to encourage social connectedness. Based on participants' feedback, participants desired time for recreational conversation before and after each meeting, less reading each week, more book study sessions to cover the material, and Zoom training before and during the study. Choosing an engaging book was key for fostering connections to self, others, and the book. The virtual book study was important for older adults as it was a form of accountability and allowed senior participants to socially engage safely from their homes.

*Keywords:* bibliotherapy, social connectedness, senior adults, book study

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 can be characterized by two phrases—“shelter at home” and “social distancing”—based on recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020). The CDC (2020) also provided evidence that older adults were at risk for severe symptoms if they contracted the novel coronavirus COVID-19. Countless senior adults isolated themselves socially to reduce the risk of viral exposure. The confinement decreased person-to-person social interaction for many older adults, despite voice- and video-based technologies available for communication and connection. New strategies were needed to support the physical and emotional well-being of America’s senior citizens. Many individuals and social service agencies examined and proposed strategies to reduce the isolation of America’s most vulnerable populations; one of those strategies was bibliotherapy (Gorenko et al., 2020).

Prior to COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, many older adults participated in gatherings at churches for social, emotional, and spiritual support. The subsequent call for quarantine and social distancing ended many opportunities for social connection. Older parishioners frequently reported to other parishioners that they were lonely but were afraid to come to church because of the risk of COVID-19 infection. The shelter-at-home guidelines discouraged regular interactions of senior adults that provided social, emotional, and spiritual support. In general, the well-being of the senior adult congregants appeared to be at risk. Parishioners who attended church functions after the church re-opened expressed concern for older parishioners not in attendance

and questioned how the homebound could be reached during the pandemic.

Bibliotherapy encompasses the idea that knowledge and comfort can be gained through reading (Brewster, 2018). Reading for therapeutic purposes has been implemented and researched in many settings, including medical, educational, and community environments (Brewster, 2018). However, few bibliotherapy studies relate to church settings. More research on bibliotherapy in a church setting may reveal beneficial results that can be implemented in other communities to foster seniors' social connectedness and reduce isolation.

According to Gorenko et al. (2020), bibliotherapy can be an effective tool to reach the homebound and may serve to lessen the isolation and loneliness of older adults by fostering connectedness. This qualitative study was designed to examine the use of virtual bibliotherapy in a church setting to foster social connectedness among senior adults.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social connectedness, the key variable in the current study, refers to individuals' perceptions of experiencing close, affirming relationships with others (Seppala et al., 2013, p. 412). The following theories guide the development of the current research study: the psychosocial development theories of Erik Erikson (1959/1994); the attachment theories of Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth et al. (1978); and recent neurological studies (Lieberman, 2013). The three theoretical frameworks underpin a comprehensive model for exploring social connectedness among older adults using bibliotherapy.

Erik Erikson (1984) was a German American psychologist trained by Anna Freud in Vienna. He investigated the psychosocial stages of human development and the development of self-identity. Originally, Erikson (1959/1994) studied infants through observation, then went on to study psychosocial development throughout the entire human life cycle by means of

observation and psychoanalysis. According to Erikson (1984), humans progress through eight stages of psychological or socioemotional development in a linear or hierarchical fashion as humans mature. However, the onset and end of each stage vary based on biological maturation, personality, temperament, social environments, human relationships, and experiences of critical events such as physical or emotional trauma. According to Erikson (1984), trauma can lead to a crisis of identity and thwart normal socioemotional development unless mediating therapy is introduced. Table 1 provides a visual representation of Erikson’s developmental theory.

**Table 1**

*Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development*

<b>Stage and Age</b>	<b>Crisis of Stage</b>	<b>Desired Outcome of Crisis</b>
Infancy: 0–1 ½ years	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
Early Childhood: 1½-3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt	Will
Play Age: 3–5 years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
School Age: 5–12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence
Adolescence: 12–18 years	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity
Young Adulthood: 18–40 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love
Adulthood: 40–65 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care
Old Age: 65+ years	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

*Note.* Adapted from *Identity and the Life Cycle* by E. Erikson, 1959/1994, p. 132. Copyright 1979 by Norton.

Erikson’s (1984) first stage of development in infancy is “basic trust versus basic mistrust,” and the last stage of psychosocial development is “integrity versus despair,” beginning at approximately age 65 and progressing to death. The final stage is typically characterized by questioning whether life has been well-lived, with the hopeful outcome being wisdom.

According to Erikson, the aspect of “hope” connects all eight stages. Erikson also postulated that the hope for a “mutual meeting” with a parent in the infant’s first stage of development connects to the hope of a “mutual meeting” with a spiritual being in the last phase of development (Erikson, 1984, p. 161).

Building on Erikson’s (1959/1994,1984) first stage of psychosocial development, Bowlby (1958) studied attachment theory, noting that patterns of attachment were formed very early in life. The original subjects of Bowlby’s research were infants and children from birth to one year of age. Qualitative data were gathered through observations of infants as they interacted with their parents, caregivers, and strangers. Infants demonstrated attachment by instinctual and learned responses such as crying, sucking, clinging, eye contact, and visual following. Bowlby concluded that attachment and dependence were very different responses. He claimed that a newborn was dependent on others for food and care at the beginning of life. However, the infant may or may not form an attachment to the caregiver.

Mary Ainsworth, an American Canadian developmental psychologist, joined Bowlby at Tavistock Clinic in London to conduct clinical research on infants’ attachment to caregivers and other individuals. Ainsworth (1965) eventually extended attachment theory to relationships outside the parent-child scenario. The researchers concluded that attachment to others is a key factor in healthy personality development and general wellbeing (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 340). Ainsworth and Bowlby’s attachment research provided a strong foundation for understanding the human need for social, emotional, and spiritual connections with others.

Lieberman (2013), a social neuroscientist, conducted groundbreaking research with his wife, Naomi Eisenberger, regarding social connectedness as a measurable construct. Lieberman and Eisenberger used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to map neural pathways in

the brain to gain a better understanding of social connectedness. Lieberman described neurological studies that revealed social connectedness was associated with three neural networks in the brain: connection, mindreading, and harmonizing. Connection refers to the ability of a person “to feel social pains and pleasures” (Lieberman, 2013, p. 11) that drives social connectedness from infancy to old age. Lieberman (2013) defined mindreading as the “ability to understand the actions and thoughts of” (p. 11) others, an attribute that also contributes to social connectedness. Lastly, harmonizing was defined as the adaptation that allows for the influence of others to help form an individual’s beliefs and values (Lieberman, 2013, p. 12).

Lieberman’s (2013) book was largely based on previous research by Eisenberger et al. (2003), which was a neurological study of social exclusion. The 2003 study involved 13 undergraduate students, including nine females and four males, who played a *Cyberball* video game while undergoing an fMRI. While undergoing an fMRI, the subject believed he or she was part of a digital game of catch with two other subjects. However, the two other subjects were computer-generated players, not human players; the avatars were programmed to exclude the human subject from the *Cyberball* game of catch. Following the fMRI *Cyberball* experience, the rejected human subjects answered questions about their experiences. The reactions of the excluded human subjects were surprising. Lieberman (2013) commented in his book that “individuals would spontaneously start talking to us about what had just happened to them. They were genuinely angry or sad about what they had gone through” (p. 58).

While the research subjects were playing *Cyberball*, Eisenberger et al. (2003) observed increased fMRI activity in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex of the brain during episodes of social pain that presented in the same manner and in the same part of the brain as physical pain.



In other words, the human brain processes physical pain and social pain in the same manner. These results were groundbreaking.

Further fMRI research led Lieberman (2013) to map social networks in the brain and to describe the manner in which the networks functioned for connection, mindreading, and harmonizing. In his book entitled *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, Lieberman (2013) described connection as a means of thriving and surviving. Lieberman reported that the neural networks for physical pain and pleasure are the exact same networks for social pain and pleasure. As a result, humans are strongly motivated to connect socially to ensure both physical and social health.

Lieberman (2013) pointed to a second area of the brain related to social connection: the mirror neuron system. This system functions in a manner that allows humans to mirror or imitate others. The mirror neuron system enables people to imagine and “mindread” the thoughts and feelings of others. Lieberman also found a third area of the brain related to social connection in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for self-control. Lieberman noted that the brain’s center for self-control promotes socialization, harmonizing, and the development and execution of group goals.

Lieberman’s (2013) work has meaningful theoretical implications for the current study. He wrote, “Increasing the social connections in our lives is probably the single easiest way to enhance our well-being” (Lieberman, 2013, p. 250). The author noted that people often connect socially by using the Internet and that these connections may bring about happiness and health. Lieberman’s findings provide a strong, evidence-based model to support the human need for social connectedness.

Each of the theoretical models discussed in the theoretical framework section of this

study made important contributions to a solid foundation to undergird the current research study of connectedness among senior adults during bibliotherapy. During bibliotherapy, people connect cognitively and emotionally with text and authors. They also connect with others in meaningful discussions of key ideas in the text and the ways those ideas connect to life.

### **Background of the Study**

Bibliotherapy is defined as reading for “information, guidance, and solace” (Brewster, 2018, p. 3). The term “bibliotherapy” was coined in 1916 in the blithe essay “A Literary Clinic” by Samuel McChord Crothers (1916). Crothers, a Unitarian pastor, discussed his meeting with a clergy friend, Dr. Bagster, who prescribed books for “patients” as a doctor might prescribe medicine. Bagster described the struggle of one patient who was a retired stockbroker feeling desolate; following the stock market had been his one intellectual pursuit (Crothers, 1916). Crothers noted that Bagster prescribed for the retired stockbroker a process of focusing on a favorite stock while reading “Ossian,” an epic Scottish poem. Bagster shared that this approach was a slow yet effective cure for the void experienced by the stockbroker.

New applications of bibliotherapy emerged during World War I as a therapy for soldiers who suffered from mental health problems (Brewster, 2018). Brewster described librarians who engaged “shell shocked” soldiers by offering reading groups or by sharing texts for individual reading to help aid in patients’ recovery.

Bibliotherapy may be employed in a variety of disciplines, such as medicine, literature, education, and psychology, yet generally falls into the categories of clinical and recreational therapy (Martins, 2018). Brewster (2018) noted that bibliotherapy became associated with psychological sciences in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1955, Caroline Shrodes was guided by the work of Sigmund Freud when she researched and wrote about bibliotherapy from a

psychological point of view (Brewster, 2018).

Shrodes (1955) explored college students' reactions to literature; Shrodes noted that reading might promote reader identification, catharsis, and insight (p. 24). After meaningful reading, some students experienced "increased self-awareness and acceptance and greater capacity to maintain satisfying relationships" (Shrodes, 1955, p. 29). These results are important for the current study. Can "meaningful reading" be an effective intervention to bring about positive mental and social health outcomes for current participants? Society has changed in many ways since the early studies of bibliotherapy. Today, advances in media and communication technologies allow people to get information virtually and to interact in alternative ways online that no longer requires personal contact. Timely studies are needed that implement virtual bibliotherapy as an intervention to mitigate the challenges of the COVID-19 era.

Monroy-Frausto et al. (2021) conducted a systematic meta-analysis of 13 previously published bibliotherapy research studies to gain insight into changes in individuals' mental health when bibliotherapy was used as a non-pharmaceutical intervention. According to Monroy-Frausto et al., many countries observed increases in mental health concerns among the general citizenry due to the isolation and stress created by the global pandemic. At the same time, mental health services were often decreased or unavailable due to lockdown orders. Monroy-Frausto et al. searched the literature in three medical databases, with original results totaling 707 articles. These articles then went through a process of review to determine whether bibliotherapy interventions were associated with positive outcomes among health care workers as well as whether the articles met the following criteria: clear objectives, a research question to fulfill the objectives, solid methodology, defined terms, and results that were in line with the stated objectives. From this review, 13 studies were identified that met the researchers' criteria.

Monroy-Frausto et al. (2021) subsequently conducted hermeneutic phenomenological analyses of the 13 studies on bibliotherapy. The researchers followed a procedure of reading each study and coding for key terms as well as reading each paper to analyze lived experiences. In other words, the researchers interpreted the research studies (hermeneutic) and considered the “lived experiences” (phenomenology) to gain an understanding of the benefits of bibliotherapy. The authors reported the most common themes in the analyzed articles as autonomy, justice, and freedom. Autonomy refers to patients’ involvement in their treatment, as well as patients’ decision-making and problem-solving. All of these attributes contributed to the patients’ ability to help bring about successful personal outcomes. The theme of justice was discussed as researchers determined that bibliotherapy was accessible in many settings, among varying economic levels, to many patients successively and was available publicly or privately. The researchers described the third theme, freedom, as evidence of bibliotherapy as an intervention that could bring about greater liberty for patients. The literature indicated the possibility of positive results of bibliotherapy aiding in the decrease of symptoms, allowing for increased choices and abilities for patients.

Monroy-Frausto et al. (2021) reported that the majority of the 13 bibliotherapy studies revealed positive mental health outcomes and concluded that bibliotherapy was a promising alternative to pharmaceuticals in supporting mental health in a variety of settings. The authors also concluded that the model they created for reviewing bibliotherapy research might foster the use of the intervention by other clinicians to bring about positive outcomes. These researchers presented evidence of support for bibliotherapy during the era of COVID-19; however, the researchers did not specifically address older populations.

Gorenko et al. (2020) conducted a review of the literature on bibliotherapy with the older

adult demographic in mind. The researchers focused on research studies that discussed remote delivery of interventions for socially isolated older adults, as well as isolated senior adults who were psychologically distressed. The researchers first considered current systematic reviews and randomized control trials, followed by articles with sound methodology. Based on a systematic meta-analysis of 19 research studies, the researchers recommended the use of bibliotherapy as an intervention for socially isolated, elderly individuals who lacked Internet connectivity. For example, senior adults could read the same book and then connect with friends over the phone to discuss the book. The authors discussed other telephone-delivered interventions, such as an educational program on a wide variety of subjects as well as a befriending program, as ways for older adults to connect.

Gorenko et al. (2020) also recommended the remote interventions of video- and audio-virtual health appointments, hand-held technologies to play games with friends, and computer-based interventions. Many of these recommendations were observed by the student researcher among parishioners in the church in which the current study was conducted; the congregants mentioned watching the virtual sermons online and meeting with friends on the phone or online.

The social distancing of COVID-19 presented an unexpected and fresh opportunity to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on older adults' perceptions of social connectedness. New studies have added to past research on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for helping people of all ages combat isolation, fight loneliness, and sharpen mental health. As advocated by Brewster (2018), the time had come to employ the time-honored practice of bibliotherapy to enhance social connectedness among vulnerable populations.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. For the purposes of the current research study, bibliotherapy was defined as "reading for information, guidance, and solace" (Brewster, 2018, p. 3). Social connectedness was defined as "a person's subjective sense of having close and positively experienced relationships with others in the social world" (Seppala et al., 2013, p. 412).

### **Research Question**

What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy?

### **Research Design**

This study was a non-experimental, qualitative study of social connectedness among senior adults who participated in a virtual book study. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of connectedness among senior participants of the virtual book study in a church community. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research distills an experience to core meanings, ultimately resulting in a few main themes. Phenomenological research aligned seamlessly with the current research project and allowed for the common themes of participants' shared book study experiences to emerge as they related to social connectedness.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After approval by the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University was received, a small group of eight senior adults (age 65 and older) was recruited from the congregation of a Protestant church in central Florida to participate in a virtual book study meeting four times, every other week. The book chosen for the study was *A Gentle Answer: Our*

*“Secret Weapon” in An Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020). Participants were solicited by means of church announcements and flyers distributed during church services as well as via email (see Appendix A).

The intervention in this study was a virtual book study conducted via Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) for older adults who attended the church. A church elder conducted the book study for a total of five sessions, including the orientation. The book was chosen based on its emphasis on the current challenges of a polarized society that have become magnified by the stresses of COVID-19. The book study was conducted virtually to reach seniors who were still sheltering at home due to concerns about COVID-19 and its variants. Each Zoom meeting was audio- and video-recorded. Recordings were saved for future research and data analysis.

To address the research question, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of five volunteers who participated in at least three of the five sessions of the book study. The interview questions were designed to gather data regarding the participants’ perceptions of connectedness after the virtual book study (see Appendix B). Individual interviews were scheduled either face-to-face or via Zoom, with a planned duration of 30-45 minutes. The researcher took notes and recorded the interviews using Otter (<https://otter.ai>) for face-to-face meetings and Zoom for virtual meetings. Otter was used to prepare all interview transcripts. The interview transcripts were exported to word processing software for subsequent data analyses.

The transcripts were reviewed and validated to clarify any ambiguous or unclear verbiage by consulting the audio recordings of the interviews. In addition, the transcripts were validated by the interviewees. After validation, the transcripts were reviewed and coded to determine keywords, phrases, and themes. Next, commonalities between the individual and group themes were highlighted to provide a holistic overview of the senior adults’ perceptions of

connectedness during the book study.

### **Ethical Protections**

Participants were informed that the virtual book study sessions and the semi-structured interviews were audio- and video-recorded. However, the recordings of the book study sessions were not addressed or analyzed in the current study.

Participants who agreed to be interviewed at the end of the book study signed the consent form that described the parameters of the use of the recordings of the interviews and the resulting transcripts (see Appendix C). The participants in the book study were not informed of the specific purpose of the study since an open announcement of a study of connectedness might influence the overall tenor of the discussions in the book study as well as the results of interviewees' responses to the interview questions (Appendix B). Instead, the interviewees were made aware of the study's emphasis on their perceptions of virtual book studies. Potential risks in this study were minimal. This minor deception did not influence the results of the study.

After transcript validation, pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewee. All subsequent analyses and results referred to subjects using the assigned pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of the subjects.

### **Limitations**

The current study involved the following limitations and delimitations. Using a virtual book study as an intervention required a certain level of confidence and comfort with technical skills for each participant. A lack of computer skills or Internet access may have negatively influenced prospective participants' willingness to participate in the study or their perceptions regarding social connectedness. The text chosen for the book study may have also influenced the level of social interaction that occurred during the book study intervention. The book study took



place within a relatively short period of time; the five sessions over a period of 9 weeks and synchronous delivery method may have inhibited participants' ability to connect socially.

Delimitations of the study included the use of older adult subjects who were members of a church community and the small sample size. The virtual experiences of older adult participants may not be generalizable to the general population. However, a small sample size was appropriate for a book study in which participants shared their thoughts and feelings. Members of a church community may have been more open to connectedness than the average population. Finally, the small number of people in the study may not have been representative of the larger community of senior adults.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following key terms are used in this study.

- **bibliotherapy**: reading for “information, guidance, and solace” (Brewster, 2018, p. 3).
- **connectedness**: strong cohesion within a group that encourages freedom of expression of thoughts and ideas as well as learning and growing to foster well-being (Malyn et al., 2020, p. 719)
- **connection**: social connectedness is linked to well-being, realized through feelings of social pains and pleasures (Lieberman, 2013, p. 11).
- **fMRI**: non-invasive imaging of the brain that may use contrast to highlight active brain areas (Liney, 2010, p. 125)
- **social connection**: meaningful social relationships with others (Seppala et al., 2013, p. 412).

## **Significance of the Study**

This study provided a new understanding of the influence of bibliotherapy on social relationships and perceptions of connectedness among senior adults. Bibliotherapy was used to foster social connectedness among senior adults in a church setting during a time of social distancing. The results of the study provided a model for the implementation of bibliotherapy programs with older adults that may be shared with church and community organizations in hopes of encouraging the social connectedness of older adults. As early as 1995, Mother Teresa wrote of the great disease of the “poverty of loneliness” in the West (Vardey, 1995, p. 79). Isolation and loneliness were magnified during COVID-19 shutdowns. Finding effective interventions to aid in fostering connectedness among elderly adults was critical to their health and wellbeing. Bibliotherapy may be one of the solutions to ease the loneliness of elderly adults by fostering interactions, relationships, and connectedness.

By studying older adults in a virtual book study, key elements were determined to create a replicable model for implementing bibliotherapy in other churches and community settings. Through participation in a virtual bibliotherapy book study, more senior adults may experience close positive relationships regardless of location and may experience an improved sense of mental health and wellbeing.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. Bibliotherapy is used as an intervention for all age ranges and for a variety of social, emotional, and physical maladies. This chapter focused on current literature related to applications of bibliotherapy by age group as an intervention during COVID-19, remote delivery of bibliotherapy, and fostering social connectedness.

### **Bibliotherapy for Children and Adolescents**

A number of important studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of bibliotherapy among children and adolescents for coping with serious issues such as grief and death. Literature examining the essential elements of texts intended for use in children's bibliotherapy was first considered since book characters may serve to connect to readers; in addition literary characters may also serve as models for overcoming adverse situations (Aziz et al., 2018). Next explored was research focused on bibliotherapy training for parents in order to help children. Lastly, bibliotherapy for children and adolescents was examined in a group context. Each of these three elements of literature is important when considering its use for bibliotherapy as an important intervention to foster health and wholeness; however, in group bibliotherapy scenarios, the text used may also be considered a tool for generating therapeutic discussion (Conover, 2020).

Aziz et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study that included a literature review of 950

randomly selected texts to determine the criteria for selecting materials for bibliotherapy's use among children in Malaysia. The purpose of the study was to develop an instrument to assess children's literature for bibliotherapeutic elements. Children's literature that included the determined features could possibly support healing for children who have experienced traumatic events. The authors randomly selected 10 libraries within two urban areas in Malaysia and conducted interviews with the associated librarians to determine key features of children's literature, as well as the critical features noted by previous researchers. Aziz et al. developed 10 elements to use for the evaluation of books under consideration for bibliotherapy among children. Prospective texts were chosen from the 10 libraries and assessed using the criteria in Table 2.

Aziz et al. (2018) found that the 10 libraries purchased local literature that pertained to many of the needs and challenges of children in Malaysia. However, when the books were assessed for the 10 key literary elements, certain elements were present more often than others. The elements present in the highest percentage (12.36%) in the randomly selected books were objective, well-written, plot, language and vocabulary, and setting. The Perpustakaan Raja Tun Uda library housed the books with the highest percentage of books with the key elements. However, the percentages of the elements varied from library to library for the other nine locations, with an average rate of 10–11%. Evidence of suitability, character, and ability to stimulate imagination appeared in an average of 9-10% of the assessed texts overall. The features least evident in the randomly selected texts across all 10 libraries were the encouragement of discussion and encouragement of reading and attention, with an average occurrence respectively of 6.24% and 7.1%.

**Table 2***Key Bibliotherapy Features for Children's Literature*

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Description of feature</b>
Objective	Objective clearly states the aim of the text and invites the attention of children.
Well-written	Text relates to problem or issue prompting child to identify with characters and gain understanding.
Encouragement of discussion	Story operates as a tool to facilitate discussion of child with counsellor, teacher, or parent.
Suitability	Proper reading level and subject matter for child.
Encouragement of reading and attention	Story presents inviting text and illustrations.
Ability to stimulate imagination	Story offers a variety of ways to solve problem.
Plot	Story has an interesting realistic storyline.
Language and vocabulary	Story has clear language that is easy to understand.
Character	Character(s) is/are relatable, demonstrating growth and change in the story.
Setting	Story has a realistic setting that is clearly described.

*Note.* Adapted from “Assessing Bibliotherapy Elements in Malaysian Children’s Literature,” by R. A. Aziz, L. F. Hassan, S. M. Radzi, and S. N. Anis, 2019, *International Journal of Education and Knowledge Management Brief*, 2(1), p. 4-5. (<https://rpajournals.com/ijekm>). CC BY-NC.

Aziz et al. (2018) concluded that bibliotherapy could be a useful tool for children facing difficulties in their lives, such as divorce, death, and poverty. In addition, the researchers created guidelines to assist stakeholders in choosing children’s literature for use in bibliotherapy and reviewed the holdings of public libraries in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, two cities in Malaysia. Aziz et al. concluded that a larger number of libraries should be examined to generalize from their research and recommended that children’s authors and illustrators should be made aware of

the challenges Malaysian children face and encouraged to write children's books to reflect the real-life subjects of children's struggles.

Von Drasek (2016) undertook a similar study to examine children's texts that addressed the difficult subject of grief, primarily related to death, in children's picture books. The texts had been identified as possible texts to use in bibliotherapy in the United States. The researcher examined 92 picture books related to death and dying, initially focusing on literary value (i.e., text presentation and impact) and artistic merit (i.e., the capacity of pictures to help tell the story). The exemplars also included three criteria specified by the author: relatable characters, texts that encouraged readers to express feelings, and text that highlighted remembering and honoring the person who had died. The author stated that memorializing was a key component of any text, as it fostered a new understanding of the reader's relationship with the deceased.

Von Drasek (2016) expressed the need for clear texts depicting the finality of physical death yet also highlighted the critical importance of remembering and honoring the deceased. Of the 92 books Von Drasek evaluated, the text that best met the desired criteria was *Always and Forever* by Alan Durant (2013; as cited in Von Drasek, 2016). In this text, animal friends Otter, Mole, and Hare cope with the loss of Fox. In stirring language, mourning was experienced through the winter, but joy and a celebration of the life of Fox were expressed in the spring. According to Von Drasek, similar texts have great potential for use as a tool to foster healing for children when read and reread over time. Texts describing the difficulties of shorter separations have been described in the following study.

Tubbs et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study of 30 children's storybooks that addressed the stress that military deployment of a family member had upon the members of the family. The authors claimed that their qualitative study—using a descriptive content analysis

design—was the first to examine bibliotherapy as a possible tool for use with military families. The foci of the study were to identify books that were available for young children (ages 3 to 8 years) related to the military deployment of a family member, to identify characteristics of deployed families that were demonstrated by characters in storybooks, and to determine the problems and coping strategies related to deployment that were most common in the texts.

Tubbs et al. (2019) chose books from the researchers' sponsoring university library, a children's literature database, popular book vendor websites, and military websites, yielding an original total of 42 sources. After review, the researchers found that 30 titles met the picture book inclusion criteria (i.e., illustrations on each page and simple texts to be read aloud to children) and told deployment stories from children's points of view.

The books were analyzed by the lead researcher and a second trained evaluator using the Military Bibliotherapy Coding Instrument for Children's Books (MBCICB), an instrument that was adapted from two inventories that were created by Moulton et al. (2011, as cited in Tubbs et al., 2019) and Pajo and Stuart (2012, as cited in Tubbs et al., 2019). The instrument contained seven items requiring informational responses about the book, such as the author and title, and 19 items that described the stories' characters in the form of multiple-choice responses. The final two questions of the MBCICB were open-ended responses about the problems or challenges presented in the story and the ways they were resolved. The results of Tubbs et al.'s (2019) analyses of the 30 books revealed that most children who were main characters were male (62.5%,  $n = 20$ ); in addition, the deployed person was also mostly male (78.1%,  $n = 25$ ) and White (62.5%,  $n = 20$ ). The most common problem of the children's characters was sadness (64%). In 67% of the books, the children's most prominent coping strategies were to stay connected with the deployed person and to talk with an adult. An unexpected coping strategy was

expressing pride in the deployed family member's service in 9.4% of the books. Based on their analyses, Tubbs et al. concluded that greater diversity was needed in storybooks related to deployment. The research study also exposed a gap in children's literature regarding reintegration following deployment. Each of the 30 books analyzed in this study was recommended for individual or small group use to help children develop coping strategies and to reduce the sense of isolation many military children experience.

The aforementioned studies secured well-chosen books that were closely aligned with the needs of the readers as the foundational element of bibliotherapy (Aziz et al., 2019; Tubbs et al., 2019; Von Drasek, 2016). Each study also shared the element of connection. Aziz et al. (2019) noted that children might benefit by relating and connecting with characters who experience similar problems to their own, as the book characters may bring new coping strategies to light. Von Drasek (2016) shared that exemplar books regarding grief may guide the reader to a new understanding of their relationship with the deceased. In the study conducted by Tubbs et al. (2019), a predominant coping strategy in children's books about the deployment of a family member was to stay connected with the deployed family member. Connection is a key theme in books designated for children's bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy may also be used as a tool to foster resiliency in military children. Conover (2020) conducted a quasi-experimental study of 66 active-duty military members and their families to determine whether a bibliotherapy intervention could increase children's resiliency and decrease problem behaviors among military children. Conover chose seven Tell Me a Story (TMAS) intervention locations and purposely selected families to participate based on predetermined criteria: children were required to be 6 to 10 years of age, and one parent must have been on active duty for at least one year, was over the age of 18 years, and was able to



speak and read English.

The intervention in Conover's (2020) pilot study was TMAS, which was created by the Military Child Education Coalition in 2005 to help military families cope with everyday stressors, frequent relocations, parental duty changes, and wartime deployment. TMAS consists of a one-day event for up to 50 military families. During the event, a guest reader models a read-aloud of a children's book, followed by a guided discussion. Following the modeled story and discussion, the families take part in creative activity and are given a copy of the book to take home with instructions to continue reading and discussing the book three to five times a week.

The parents of the participants in Conover's (2020) study filled out the following surveys for their children (18 females and seven males) before and after the TMAS intervention: the Ego-Resiliency Q-Sort (Taylor et al., 2014, as cited in Conover, 2020), the Child and Youth Resiliency Measure ( Liebenberg et al., 2013, as cited in Conover, 2020), and the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000, as cited in Conover, 2020). Conover (2020) conducted analyses of covariance to determine whether any differences existed between pre- and posttest scores on the Ego-Resiliency Q-Sort; no significant differences were observed ( $M_{\text{pretest}} = 6.5$ ,  $M_{\text{posttest}} = 6.7$ ,  $p = .959$ ). However, a comparison of the pre- and posttest scores on the Child and Youth Resiliency Measure revealed differences in girls' and boys' resiliency test scores, with posttest scores demonstrating a large effect size for girls,  $P = .027$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$ . In addition, the results of the Child Behavior Checklist analyses also revealed differences from pretest to posttest in girl's problem behavior,  $P = .000$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.549$ .

Conover (2020) concluded that the TMAS family bibliotherapy intervention fostered resiliency among female children and improved behavior in some of the participants. The author recommended that more data were needed over an extended time frame in case-controlled

conditions to gain greater insight into the validity, reliability, and efficacy of the TMAS intervention.

The research that was undertaken by Rafihi-Ferreira et al. (2018) in Brazil also required parent training in bibliotherapy training. The purpose of the study was to investigate the efficacy of a bibliotherapy and doll intervention for children fearful of sleeping alone. The randomized control group study included 68 participants ages 4 – 6 years, with an intervention and control (waitlist) group. To be included in the study, children had to co-sleep with parents because of nighttime fear at least three times a week and demonstrate other anxiety symptoms based on parents' survey responses.

The intervention included training for parents on ways to read a themed book aloud to children and use a doll to help children sleep alone (Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018). At least one parent first met with the principal researcher for 60 minutes to be trained for home application of the bibliotherapy intervention. The parent also received a phone call once a week for the four weeks of the intervention to check on problems and progress and to review the sleep log kept by the parent. The researchers gave the parent the book *Sleeping with Rafi: Good Night my Child*, a stuffed kangaroo (the character Rafi in the book), and a letter describing the importance of positively reinforcing the successful strides of children to sleep alone. In the book, the character Rafi has difficulties sleeping alone because of nighttime fears, but as the story progresses, the mother kangaroo helps Rafi to put a routine into place that helps him to sleep alone. The study protocol required the parent to read the book to the child every night for four weeks. The stuffed kangaroo Rafi served as an object for the child to identify with, care for, and practice the sleeping routine shared in the book.

Rafihi-Ferreira et al. (2018) collected data using a researcher-created survey of four

questions answered with “yes” or “no” regarding the satisfaction, motivation, and adherence to the protocol along with four instruments: the Sleep Habits Inventory for Preschool Children (Crowell et al., 1987, as cited in Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018), the Preschool Anxiety Scale (Spence et al., 2001, as cited in Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018), the Fear Survey Schedule for Infants–Preschoolers (Ollendick, 1983, as cited in Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018), and the Child Behavior Checklist 1½-5 years (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000, as cited in Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018). The parent answered the surveys before and after the intervention. Composite mean scores of the four instruments were compared to determine whether significant differences were found before and after the intervention. The results of the analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3**

*General Estimating Equations Comparison of Composite Mean Scores on the Sleep Habits Inventory*

Scale	Intervention			Control (Waiting List)			Statistic
	Pre (n = 34)	Post (n = 34)	Follow Up (n = 32)	Pre (n = 34)	Post (n = 34)	Follow Up (n = 34)	Wald $\chi^2$ (df)
SHIPC:							
Total Mean (SD)	23.4 (6.7)	7.3 (6.6)	9.2 (7.4)	25.2 (6.3)	24.0 (6.6)	24.3 (6.5)	292.3* (6)

*Note.* SHIPC = Sleep Habits Inventory for Preschool Children. Adapted from “Brief Treatment for Nighttime Fears and Co-sleeping Problems: A Randomized Clinical Trial,” by R. E. Rafihi-Ferreira, E. F. M. Silvaes, F. R. Asbahr, and T. H. Ollendick, 2018, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 58, p. 57 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2018.06.008>). Copyright 2018 by Elsevier.

\* p < .001

The findings of analysis presented in Table 3 revealed that the children’s composite mean scores of the intervention group on the Sleep Habits Inventory were significantly different from the control group (Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018). The treatment group appeared to demonstrate reduced numbers of dysfunctional sleep behaviors after the intervention.

**Table 4**

*General Estimating Equations Comparisons of Children’s Behavioral and Anxiety Symptoms by Treatment Groups and Protocol Phases*

Scale	Intervention			Control (Waiting List)			Wald $\chi^2$ (df)
	Pre (n = 34)	Post (n = 34)	Follow Up (n = 32)	Pre (n = 34)	Post (n = 34)	Follow Up (n = 34)	
<b>CBCL:</b>							
Total Mean (SD)	62.3 (9.7)	51.0 (9.8)	48.7 (9.9)	60.5 (8.8)	60.1 (8.6)	60.2 (8.6)	131.9* (6)
<b>PAS:</b>							
Total Mean (SD)	50.3 (16.8)	32.3 (15.7)	27.7 (15.1)	43.7 (18.1)	42.9 (17.8)	44.0 (16.6)	120.3* (6)
<b>FSSIP:</b>							
Total Mean (SD)	63.8 (27.1)	45.7 (23.8)	42.1 (23.0)	55.7 (25.0)	56.4 (25.4)	56.7 (25.1)	51.4* (6)

*Note.* CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist; PAS = Preschool Anxiety Scale; FSSIP = Fear Survey Schedule for Infants–Preschoolers. Adapted from “Brief Treatment for Nighttime Fears and Co-sleeping Problems: A Randomized Clinical Trial,” by R. E. Rafihi-Ferreira, E. F. M. Silvaes, F. R. Asbahr, and T. H. Ollendick, 2018, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 58, p. 57 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2018.06.008>). Copyright 2018 by Elsevier.

\* p < .001

Rafihi-Ferreira et al. (2018) found many benefits in the study, noting that bibliotherapy appeared to be an effective intervention used in the home to reduce anxiety and poor sleep behaviors of children. The data suggested that the intervention brought about positive results for the intervention group, thus improving the likelihood of child participants sleeping in their own beds and having less anxiety in general.

A number of research studies point to the benefits of participation in bibliotherapy reading groups among adolescents. For example, Tijms et al. (2018) conducted an experimental study of 90 teen and pre-teen students from low socioeconomic groups in the Netherlands to determine whether a bibliotherapy reading group would improve students' academic success. The school-based intervention included students ages 12–14 years in poor areas of the Netherlands; 50 students were randomly assigned to a control group, and 40 were assigned to the bibliotherapy intervention group. The bibliotherapy intervention groups met weekly for 45 minutes at least eight to 10 times during a 12-week period. The following instruments were used to measure key variables of interest:

- Reading comprehension was measured using the Grade 6 version of the Vlaamse Test Begrijpend Lezen (as cited in Tijms et al., 2018).
- Reading attitude was measured by the Bazar Reading Attitude (as cited in Tijms et al., 2018).
- Reading motivation was assessed using the Reading Motivation and Reading Interest Questionnaire (as cited in Tijms et al., 2018).
- Social-emotional competencies were evaluated using the School Attitude Questionnaire (as cited in Tijms et al., 2018).

Tijms et al. (2018) analyzed the data for both the control and intervention groups before and after the book club intervention using *t* tests of independent samples. The results of the analyses revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups from pretest to posttest. Paired *t* tests were subsequently used to determine the progress of each group and variable. The only notable finding for the control group was a significant decline in socio-emotional competencies between the pre- and posttest scores,  $t(89) = 2.03, p < .05$ . The experimental group demonstrated significant differences from pretest to posttest in reading comprehension,  $t(89) = -2.08, p < .05$ ; recreational reading attitude,  $t(89) = 2.90, p < .05$ ; and social-emotional competencies,  $t(89) = -2.14, p < .05$ . Tijms et al. (2018) further analyzed the results using analysis of covariance to investigate the effect of the intervention. Table 5 displays the results of the analysis.

Tijms et al. (2018) concluded that overall reading attitude, recreational reading attitude, reading comprehension, and social-emotional competencies increased after the bibliotherapy intervention and demonstrated a small effect size. These results provided empirical evidence of the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in improving key areas of reading and social connectedness among this sample of teens and pre-teens from low-income families in the Netherlands.

**Table 5***Comparison Scores for Experimental and Control Groups Using the Pretest as Covariate*

Variable	Group	Baseline		Post-Intervention		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial $\eta^2$
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Reading Comprehension	Exp.	12.73	4.38	13.77	4.94	7.63	.007	.09
	Control	13.14	4.52	11.96	5.32			
Reading Attitude Total	Exp.	64.82	14.01	59.90	14.16	5.89	.009	.07
	Control	63.27	17.24	65.84	16.89			
Recreational Attitude	Exp.	33.36	7.98	29.21	8.37	9.33	.002	.10
	Control	31.51	8.87	33.20	8.35			
Academic Attitude	Exp.	31.46	7.09	30.69	6.55	1.41	.119	.02
	Control	31.76	9.25	32.63	9.90			
Reading Motivation	Exp.	69.74	15.69	74.32	15.87	2.32	.066	.03
	Control	73.34	19.50	71.61	19.81			
Social-Emotional Competencies	Exp.	57.32	8.36	59.06	9.13	8.38	.002	.10
	Control	56.28	8.16	54.21	9.31			

*Note.* Experimental  $n = 40$ ; Control  $n = 50$ . Adapted from “Bibliotherapeutic Book Club Intervention to Promote Reading Skills and Social-Emotional Competencies in Low SES Community-Based High Schools: A Randomised Controlled Trial,” by J. Tijms, M. A. Stoop, and J. N. Polleck, 2018, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 41(3), p. 537 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12123>). Copyright 2017 by UKLA.

Jacob and DeGuzman (2016) conducted a study of 30 depressed female high school students in the Philippines to determine the influence of bibliotherapy on adolescent depression. The researchers noted that the Philippines had the highest incidence of depression in Southeast Asia at that time. Participants were all female, ages 13-16 years, middle-class, housed in an urban setting, and had high pretest scores on depression scales (Jacob & De Guzman, 2016, p.

103). The teens were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups for the school-based intervention, which consisted of eight 90-minute bibliotherapy modules that were implemented during the school day over a 6-week period. The bibliotherapy sessions were entitled “Taking in the Good,” following the theory developed by Rick Hanson (2013; as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). The modules used the stories and experiences of other people to guide the participants along the steps of Hanson’s theory, which included having a positive experience, enriching the experience, absorbing the experience, and linking positives to a negative experience.

Jacob and De Guzman (2016) used the following tools to measure participant depression before and after the intervention: the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016); the Asian Adolescent Depression Scale (AADS; Woo et al., 2004, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016); and the Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale-II (KADS; LeBlanc et al., 2002, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). The assessment scales for each depression inventory use the following ranges: BDI-II: normal 0-13, mild 14-15, moderate 20-18, and severe 29-63 (Beck et al., 1996, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). The AAD includes the following ranges: normal 1-60, minimal 61-79, depressed 80-100 (Woo et al., 2004, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). Lastly, the KADS utilizes the following scale for diagnosing depression: minimal 0-6, mild 7-11, moderate 12-22, and severe 23-33 (LeBlanc et al., 2002, as cited in Jacob & De Guzman, 2016). In order to be chosen for participation in the study, the female adolescents’ pretest depression scores on the three instruments were  $BDI-II > 14$ ,  $AADS > 61$ , and  $KADS > 12$ . In other words, the teens were moderately depressed at the beginning of the study. Posttest comparisons of the experimental and control groups using *t* tests of independent samples revealed significant



differences between the scores from pretest to posttest on the three depression instruments, as depicted in Table 6. In addition, effect sizes were computed.

**Table 6**

*Posttest Depression Score Comparisons of Filipino Female Adolescents After Bibliotherapy Intervention*

Scale	Group	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
BDI-II <sup>a</sup>	Experimental	-3.794	0.001	1.44
	Control			
AADS <sup>b</sup>	Experimental	-3.721	0.001	2.30
	Control			
KADS <sup>c</sup>	Experimental	-3.399	0.002	1.20
	Control			

*Note.* Experimental *n* = 15; Control *n* = 15. BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II; AADS = Asian Adolescent Depression Scale; KADS = Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale-II. Adapted from “Effectiveness of Taking in the Good Based-Bibliotherapy Intervention Program Among Depressed Filipino Female Adolescents,” by J. Jacob and R. G. De Guzman, 2016, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 23, p. 104 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2016.07.011>). Copyright 2016 by Elsevier.

a Measurement scale: 0-63.

b Measurement scale: 1-100.

c Measurement scale: 0-33.

The results of the analyses revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups on all three measures of depression; in addition, the effect sizes were very large.

Jacob and De Guzman (2016) concluded that Taking in the Good bibliotherapy was effective in reducing depression among female Filipino adolescents. However, the authors recognized the limits of the small sample size in this study and recommended a longitudinal study to confirm bibliotherapy's effectiveness in reducing depression among teens.

### **Bibliotherapy for Adults**

Brewster (2017) conducted a qualitative study of five participants aged 30–50 years old to examine the relationships between readers, the experiences of the readers, and the books the readers chose to read for pleasure. The researcher recruited participants using posters in local libraries and articles that appeared in local newspapers. The study took place in the United Kingdom, using an adult sample of convenience. Participants self-selected as believing that reading positively influenced their mental health.

Brewster (2017) conducted interviews to gather information regarding the perceived role of reading in relation to participants' mental health. Crime fiction emerged as a top choice for readers in the study. A participant named Nathan commented, "Despite the fact that somebody's been hideously murdered in the study, there is a safe boundary all around it, and someone's going to come along and solve it" (Brewster, 2017, p. 65).

The results of Brewster's (2017) data analyses revealed that participants appreciated the strong narrative of crime fiction and found the predictability a comfort, offering a safe escape from reality. The data analyses also revealed that crime fiction presented a solvable problem and that the reader was in control and invited to puzzle over the solution. The study was worth noting as it revealed a new genre of literature as potentially therapeutic for readers. Brewster concluded that readers had insight into the type of literature they found to be therapeutic and noted that reader preferences should be valued by therapists.

Canon (2018) reported similar findings in a mixed methods study of 32 female residents at a drug treatment facility in urban southwest Florida. The study was conducted as an effort to update the collection development policy of a bibliotherapy library at a women's alcohol and drug treatment center. To gather information regarding reading preferences, a voluntary survey was administered that inquired about the genre of material participants enjoyed as well as the kind of characters participants found appealing. The researcher gathered responses from 32 female residents of the center. In addition, feedback was gathered from the center's mental health professionals using a semi-structured group interview to gain insight into the way residents responded to books while in treatment. The qualitative results of the interview were hand-coded using an inductive constant comparison method.

The quantitative results of the survey revealed that 74.45% of the residents preferred to read fiction vs. nonfiction; the favorite genres were mystery and thriller books (Canon, 2018). The majority of residents did not want to read about their own personal problems but preferred to read for escape. Interestingly, the female residents also appreciated complex characters with a response of 23.33%, characters most like themselves at 13.33%, and characters who were easy to understand at 23.33%. Participants revealed a perceived "narrative interaction" of 60% through a connection to the entity telling the story; 26% of the same respondents reported a personal connection with reading in general as if the author had the respondent in mind when writing the text. Qualitative analyses of the group interview revealed that this group of mental health professionals was cautious about recommending fiction reading for residents and overwhelmingly viewed fiction reading as a distraction. The mental health professionals preferred that residents read self-help texts.

Brewster's (2017) and Canon's (2018) studies uncovered similarities. The participants in

both studies reported a clear choice of crime fiction as their preferred reading for escape from the “real world,” which allowed a respite from the challenges of mental health and addiction.

However, the majority of the sample of mental health professionals who were interviewed by Canon (2018) viewed the reading of crime fiction as an unattractive distraction, for residents often wanted to discuss the characters and storylines associated with their recreational reading during addiction therapy.

Connors et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study of 111 adult participants to determine the influence of bibliotherapy on alcohol misuse among adults. Bibliotherapy had been a successful intervention for treating problem drinking in the past and appeared well suited for the rural setting. Connors et al. noted that people who misused alcohol in rural environments and wanted to change their behavior often faced obstacles such as lack of services and transportation or having little available financial resources, or no insurance. Bibliotherapy was an intervention that met all these challenges, as it could be applied in the home and was low in cost.

Participants were recruited who considered themselves to be heavy drinkers yet had a desire to reduce their alcohol intake (Connors et al., 2017). A non-random sample of participants was enlisted using flyers and advertisements in rural areas of New York state; the resulting sample was composed of 61 women and 50 men with an average age of 47 years.

The reading in Connors’s (2017) study was a prescribed manual adapted from the Scottish writers Robertson and Heather entitled *So You Want to Cut Down Your Drinking? A Self-Help Guide to Sensible Drinking* (1985, as cited in Connors, 2017). The 122-page manual addressed self-awareness of drinking, danger signs of drinking, strategies for decreasing alcohol intake, and ways to reduce risks associated with drinking. Some of the ways the reader was engaged were to create a self-contract to lessen drinking, take quizzes, and identify a daily

drinking limit. The researchers wanted to determine whether bibliotherapy by itself or bibliotherapy combined with varying levels of telehealth support would help reduce problem drinking among this sample of volunteers. The participants were randomly assigned to three different conditions: bibliotherapy only (BT), bibliotherapy with a telephone motivational interview (BT/MI), or bibliotherapy combined with a motivational telephone interview and six biweekly phone calls for follow-up regarding the implementation of the manual (BT/MI/TT). The motivational interview was intended to encourage the participants to use the manual and finish the program. The Timeline Follow-Back Interview (Sobell & Sobell, 1992, 1996, as cited in Connors, 2017) was used for recording daily alcohol use over a 6-month period. Data were collected for changes in drinking habits regarding abstinent days, light drinking days, moderate drinking days, and heavy drinking days. Effect size analyses were conducted using Cohen's *d*. The previous analysis denotes a small effect at 0.20, a medium effect at 0.50, and a large effect size at 0.80, with results in Table 7.

Analyses of the data revealed medium and high effect sizes in the designations of abstinent and light drinking across all three levels of intervention (Connors et al., 2017). Although three master's-level therapists conducted the telehealth aspects of the research study, the telehealth engagement did not make a difference for participants in reducing alcohol use. Connors et al. concluded that the bibliotherapy manual was effective in helping participants to decrease alcohol use and suggested that a bibliotherapy manual in an electronic format may be considered for future rural interventions regarding problem drinking.

**Table 7***Effect Size from Pre to Post Treatment by Condition*

Level of Drinking	BT	BT/MI	BT/MI/TT
Abstinent days/Light Drinking (Increase)	.59	.88	.63
Heavy Drinking (Decrease)	-.16	-.59	-.36
Alcohol Consequences (Decrease)	-.53	-.16	-.35
Situational Confidence to avoid heavy drinking (Increase)	.14	.21	.87

*Note.*  $n = 111$ . BT = bibliotherapy; BT/MI = bibliotherapy/motivational interview; BT/MI/TT = bibliotherapy/motivational interview/telephone therapy. Adapted from “Secondary Prevention of Alcohol Problems in Rural Areas Using a Bibliotherapy-Based Approach,” by G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, M. A. Prince, and A. Kubiak, 2017, *Rural Mental Health*, 41(2), p. 168 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/rmh0000073>). Copyright 2017 by American Psychological Association.

Pettersson (2018) explored adults’ experiences in reading circles to determine whether involvement in book study groups contributed to the psychological well-being of adults with long-term depression and anxiety. The mixed methods study, which took place in urban Sweden, included three women and one man, 45–77 years of age. Two of the participants were retired, and the other two were in early retirement. The volunteers attended a reading circle held two hours a week for 12 weeks in 2015. Prior to each reading circle session, the participants read selected short stories or poems alone. The circle leader had several years of experience in leading reading circles and choosing appropriate literature. Pettersson mentioned that the short stories and poems used for the reading circles were by noted Swedish authors. During the reading circles, group members read some of the texts aloud and engaged in discussion.

To collect qualitative data, Pettersson (2018) conducted individual semi-structured interviews of each participant following the last reading circle meeting. Five participants had

attended all 12 meetings; however, one participant did not attend the interview. The interview questions were based on the participants' reading habits, literary preferences, perceptions of the reading circles, and general well-being. Interview data were first read for significant themes. Then the themes were used to organize participant responses. Qualitative analyses of the interview data revealed that reading circle participants experienced high-quality social interaction during the reading circle. The adults also reported that they found the reading circle sessions to be more satisfactory than unstructured socializing. The participants also valued their reading circle's group identity and the discussion that took place. Importantly, group members reported increased social activities after participation in the reading circles. In addition, the individuals reported decreased social isolation.

To collect quantitative data, Pettersson (2018) administered a modified version of the SF 12 questionnaire (Ware et al., 1996, as cited in Pettersson, 2018), which was designed to gather perceptions of mental and physical well-being. The questionnaire was administered twice—once after the second meeting and once following the 12th meeting—to gather information regarding participation and psychological well-being. The questions pertaining to physical well-being were not administered. Unfortunately, Pettersson did not provide clear evidence related to improvements in participants' well-being, and statistics were not reported in the study. However, the author wrote that at the beginning of the reading circle, only two of the participants noted that they could manage everyday activities, but at the end of 12 weeks of the study, all four group members could take care of their daily activities. All participants appreciated the literature chosen for the reading circle. Pettersson concluded that discussion and activities during the reading circle sessions helped these adults experience greater well-being, self-confidence, and social connectedness.

## Bibliotherapy for Senior Adults

Ameri et al. (2017) conducted an experimental study of 60 elderly participants aged 65 to 80 years in a retirement center in Iran to determine the influence of audiobooks on elderly subjects' mental health. Concerns for the increasing population of elderly people and a desire to support older adults' mental health spurred their desire to undertake the study. To reduce barriers to participating in the study, the researchers chose to use audiobooks so that subjects with failing eyesight or poor reading skills could participate.

The 60 participants were divided randomly into equal experimental and control groups (Ameri et al., 2017). The experimental intervention consisted of listening to audiobooks on the subjects of psychology, poetry, religion, and fiction, while the control group experienced no intervention. The experimental group's intervention consisted of eight 1-hour audio-book activities, 2 days a week, for the period of 1 month. Ameri et al. measured all participants' mental health before and after the intervention using a standardized questionnaire (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1977/1994, as cited in Ameri et al., 2017) that was designed to measure aspects of physical and mental illness from a psychological perspective. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*strongly*), participants answered questions pertaining to depression, somatic complaints, anxiety, and obsession-compulsion.

Ameri et al. (2017) compared the mean pre- and posttest scores to determine whether significant differences existed between the experimental and control groups on the SCL-90-R (Derogatis, 1977/1994, as cited in Ameri et al., 2017). The results of the data analysis revealed that the pretest mean scores of the experimental and control groups were not significantly different ( $p > .05$ ), indicating that the two groups were similar with regard to mental health and well-being at the beginning of the study. The results of a *t* test of independent samples revealed



that the posttest mean difference scores of the experimental and control group were significantly different ( $p < .001$ ); the experimental group's scores on mental health concerns were significantly lower than the control group's scores after the audio-book intervention. The researchers concluded that audiobook bibliotherapy was effective in promoting the mental health of senior adults housed in senior adult centers in Iran. A caveat regarding the conclusions includes the possibility that eight sessions were not sufficient to mitigate mental health problems. In addition, this sample of senior adults showed few signs of mental health problems at the beginning of the study.

Chamberlain (2019) conducted a qualitative study to determine the influence of participation in a bibliotherapy/poetry group for older adults in a psychiatric ward in England. According to the researcher, little research existed related to the "value of reading aloud" (Chamberlain, 2019, p. 223) for the older residents of a psychiatric ward. Fifteen people attended the reading group, and four individuals agreed to be part of the research study. The intervention consisted of ten 1-hour sessions of reading poetry aloud; five or six poems were read aloud by group members or ward staff and discussed during each session.

Following the final poetry group session, Chamberlain (2019) individually interviewed the four willing participants; two were interviewed in the ward, and two were interviewed via telephone in their homes following discharge. Using a phenomenographic protocol for analysis, the researcher reported three primary themes that emerged from the four participants' interviews: empathy, confidence, and identity. One participant discussed empathy stating, "People listening to you...rather than dismissing you as some sort of idiot" (Chamberlain, 2019, p. 229). Another participant reported confidence and said, "[ I] felt more involved by reading poetry out loud" (Chamberlain, 2019, p. 229). An example of the theme of identity was the quote, "It

[bibliotherapy] brought back happy memories of teenage years” (Chamberlain, 2019, p. 230).

The researcher suggested that the bibliotherapy/poetry group was a low-cost, easily administered intervention that could have further applications in the treatment of elderly psychiatric patients.

Malyn et al. (2020) also used qualitative research methods to examine the use of recreational bibliotherapy coupled with creative writing in London, England. The study was not specifically intended for older adults; however, the people who attended were older adults. The total sample of four different bibliotherapy groups consisted of nine females and three males, ages 52 to 74 years; the median age was 67 years. Bibliotherapy groups were led by the same facilitator. Groups were ongoing and open to the public and accepted new members until reaching a maximum number of 12 participants per group. The researcher reported that weekly meetings involved sharing and discussing writing that was created before the meeting. Then, participants received a new writing assignment to work on for the following week.

Maylyn et al. (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews of the 12 participants. A thematic analysis of the interview data uncovered the following themes: relationship to self (the perception of self as an older adult and a sense of personal achievement for participating in the book study’s group activities), relationship to others (the sense of connectedness that developed within the book study groups), relationship to the facilitator (perceptions of the role of the facilitator’s valuing and accepting participants), and intermediary object (reading and writing became a tool for participants to express their thoughts and emotions). The researchers called for further investigations of bibliotherapy to gauge the effectiveness of bibliotherapy as a treatment for social isolation and loneliness among diverse populations. This study has important implications for the current study in its exploration of senior adults’ connectedness after bibliotherapy.

## **COVID-19 Related Bibliotherapy Studies**

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has influenced many aspects of life worldwide since early 2020. Little original research regarding the use of bibliotherapy for issues related to COVID-19 has been published due to the recent nature of the pandemic. Many researchers across a variety of disciplines, who were previously familiar with the flexibility of bibliotherapy, utilized previous bibliotherapy research as a resource and tool for the social, emotional, and medical needs created by COVID-19 (Gorenko, 2020; Monroy-Frausto et al., 2021). As social structures all over the world were taxed with social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, many researchers asked what could be done to rebuild the supports of society.

Bowman (2021) shared his perceptions of the effective use of bibliotherapy in the field of family grief care in a narrative report. In the report, Bowman first noted the basics of bibliotherapy, which were defined as using literature, storytelling, or writing as tools for healing. Every family has stories, and Bowman relayed that grief and disruption often changed the telling and understanding of family stories. Following serious change due to grief and loss, the family may view the world through a different lens and may need assistance in accepting the way changes may have affected their daily life. Bowman highlighted the COVID-19 era as a time of great disruption that brought many griefs to families, not limited to the deaths of friends and family members.

Bowman (2021) examined bibliotherapy use for individuals and families who had suffered a form of loss. The field report was organized according to the subjects of bibliotherapy overview, bibliotherapy for grieving, and bibliotherapy for disruptions. Bowman included passages to illustrate the use of bibliotherapy for issues of grief and disruption. The use of stories, as opposed to other art therapies, was preferred, for stories provided a common

foundation for the family and grief counselor to work. Stories proved a useful and safe tool to prompt discussion and give voice to difficult subjects without making them too personal.

Bowman (2021) shared examples of passages that could prompt discussion regarding an aging parent, a child diagnosed with autism, and an anorexic child. Another example Bowman used to encourage discussions of resilience was a passage from the author Barbara Kingsolver. Kingsolver wrote, “In my own worst seasons, I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window” (1995, pp. 15-16, as cited in Bowman, 2021). The previous passage allowed for discussion regarding new ways to move beyond grief. The text examples given by Bowman are helpful in demonstrating ways to implement bibliotherapy into the practice of family grief counseling. Bowman also called for more research and for model creation for bibliotherapy use in the field of family relations.

Sheik (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine the effectiveness of using African folktales in sharing culturally appropriate examples for moving beyond grief in the era of COVID-19. At the time of publication, South Africa was the fifth most affected country in the world in terms of COVID-19 deaths. Sheik noted that COVID-19 distancing and sheltering requirements drastically affected the social fabric of South Africa. Gender violence increased with shelter-in-place orders, family responsibilities regarding burial decreased, and the removed nature of death was counter to the previously known cultural practices of South Africans.

The purpose of Sheik’s (2020) study was to discuss African folktales that could be integrated into South African academic English curricula to promote decolonizing education, and that could also be used as tools for healing to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 era. In all, four folk tales were examined to guide South Africans in healing from current issues of violence

in marriage, neglected family responsibilities, and the grief experienced with death and separation. One of the folk tales Sheik shared to model coping with grief was *The Mother Hen's Story* (Onuchukwu, 2003, as cited in Sheik, 2020). In the story, a hen behaved in an insensitive manner as a distraught king struggled with the dying and eventual death of his son. Explaining herself, the hen shared the story of her life, for she faced death every day from her time as an egg. As a mother, her children were murdered daily, and her family members were chased and eaten. Yet, even with these many pangs of sadness, her husband, the rooster, greeted each day with a lively crow. After hearing her story, the king realized that he needed to be grateful for all he had, as many people and creatures were not as fortunate as he.

Sheik (2020) defined bibliotherapy as the use of literature to support mental health and found the practice of bibliotherapy to be in harmony with the South African idea of ubuntu. Ubuntu stresses an understanding of the essential interconnectedness of community (Msila, 2015). African folktales connect people with lessons that affirm the ideals of their culture and beliefs. In closing, Sheik used the example of an African proverb to support the public safety measures of mask-wearing and social distancing by noting, "If you follow the elephant, you never get entangled in the forest" (Sheik, 2020, p. 413).

### **Remote Delivery**

COVID-19 safety measures necessitated that many everyday tasks be carried out in new ways. Numerous families were required to be home-based, with adults working from home and children attending school virtually. The capacity to carry out the essentials of life via phone or computer was widely realized. The virtual abilities gained by society as a result of COVID-19 sheltering and distancing orders may be applied to bibliotherapy. For example, a bibliotherapy group that may have met in person using print sources may find it necessary to meet virtually

with shelter-in-place orders, or a therapist may choose for a patient to work through materials that were not in traditional print format yet were available online. The virtual or non-print measures raised questions regarding the use of bibliotherapy in non-traditional ways. Within current research, podcasts and the Internet were revealed as alternative methods of delivering bibliotherapy.

Casares and Binkley (2021) conducted a review of more than 90 sources related to podcasts, bibliotherapy, counseling, and their intersection; podcasts were introduced as an updated format for delivering bibliotherapy. A podcast is a digital audio file that a listener may access via a smartphone or tablet; podcasts have become very popular as people may listen while performing other tasks. The podcast popularity has been steadily growing, something that Casares and Binkley (2021) noted as a “cultural shift” (p. 20), for the podcast has become a preferred way for many people to access information. In their study, bibliotherapy was defined as using reading to foster the healing process. Casares and Binkley applied the previous definition to the modality of podcasts. Critical aspects of podcasts were described, and podcasts were recommended by categories of interests and age groups for use in a contemporary model of bibliotherapy.

Casares and Brinkley (2021) noted that podcasts were generally 30–60 minutes and may be created by professionals or amateurs. Just as books are on an endless variety of topics, podcasts follow suit; podcast content includes topics such as interviews, lectures, and storytelling. The digital audio files are free and accessible.

For purposes of counseling, Casares and Binkley (2021) recommended that counselors evaluate podcasts before recommending them to patients for therapeutic purposes and shared the following steps as a guiding framework. The counselor and patient first chose a counseling goal.

With the goal in mind, the counselor would search the podcast platform for relevant audios to support the goal. After the counselor reviewed useful podcasts, the audio could be recommended to the patient.

Parenting was one example of a podcast subject (Casares & Binkley, 2021). Within the parenting subject were the podcasts *Mom and Dad Are Fighting*, *Respectful Parenting*, and *This Glorious Mess*. Podcasts such as these could also be used as tools for meeting what has been traditionally considered bibliotherapy goals, such as learning new information, developing skills, or generating unique solutions. Casares and Binkley (2021) promoted the value and variety of podcasts as an evolutionary bibliotherapy tool. Podcasts are available in a remote setting, making them ideal for the COVID-19 era, and may be used as a tool for therapists to connect with patients by discussing the audio content.

Similarly, the Internet may also enable a remote model of bibliotherapy using virtual content. Tavallaei et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative quasi-experimental study to research the effectiveness of internet-based bibliotherapy for enhancing mindfulness to mitigate pain and distress experienced with headaches. Participants included 30 females ages 18–50 years who had been diagnosed with tension headaches and migraine. Subjects must have graduated from high school and have access to the Internet. In all, 30 participants were chosen and randomly assigned evenly to an experimental and a control group. The experimental group participants received an 8-week bibliotherapy intervention and a weekly check-in from a support therapist to gauge adherence to the bibliotherapy eBook guide and to answer questions about the content. However, the control group continued with prescribed medical treatment.

The eBook intervention focused on mindfulness in the social, emotional, and physical sense (Tavallaei et al., 2018). The study used a randomized design, with a pretest and posttest.

Participants were surveyed using four different instruments: the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Sahebi et al., 2005, as cited in Tavallaei et al., 2018 ); Migraine Disability Assessment Test (MIDAS; Stewart et al., 2003, as cited in Tavallaei et al., 2018); McGill's Short Form Questionnaire (MPQ-SF; Melzack & Katz, 2001, as cited in Tavallaei et al., 2018); and Mindfulness Inventory (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003, as cited in Tavallaei et al., 2018).

Before and after the bibliotherapy intervention, Tavallaei et al. (2018) surveyed all participants using the previously mentioned instruments. The results were evaluated using an analysis of covariance. The analysis revealed significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and control groups (not including the pretest means) in the pain intensity index ( $p < .035$ ), level of disability ( $p < .0001$ ), perception of distress ( $p < .0001$ ), and mindfulness ( $p < .0001$ ; Tavallaei et al., 2018, p. 179). The internet-based bibliotherapy appeared to improve the quality of life for participants and decrease mental distress. Tavallaei et al. concluded that bibliotherapy was an effective intervention that was easily accessible, low in cost, and flexible for the participant.

As described previously, bibliotherapy may be delivered online using technology. The current study used an online format for the delivery of the book study intervention. To join the book study, participants were required to use Zoom technology (<https://zoom.us>). Recent research supported the willingness of senior adults to embrace new technologies. Brooke and Clark (2020) studied the early lockdown experience of 19 older adults aged 70 or older in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland from March 30, 2020, to May 1, 2020. Participants were recruited via an electronic flyer posted by staff at the researchers' institution on their social media sites.



Brooke and Clark (2020) gathered data using semi-structured telephone interviews of 19 participants who were interviewed every 2 weeks for 8 weeks. Brooke conducted all interviews and followed the same protocol for each interview; questions were structured to gain insight into participants' early experiences of sheltering in place, social distancing, concerns regarding COVID-19, and participant coping strategies for the new COVID-19 era. The researchers analyzed responses from the first interviews and found themes indicating that social media such as Facebook groups and neighborhood resources such as family and neighbors provided effective social support during the earliest stages of the pandemic. For example, Barbara, a participant, commented, "Nearly all my friends over 70, 80, and one over 90 all use social media" (Brooke & Clark, 2020, p. 4397). The researchers noted that social media was a way for older people to adapt to the lockdown guidelines and to maintain social connectedness with family and friends. Coping strategies of the older adults during COVID-19 lockdowns in this study may be especially useful to medical professionals, social service personnel, and social scientists in their efforts to better serve aging populations in the future.

### **Bibliotherapy and Connectedness**

The following bibliotherapy studies used the theme of connection to organize gathered data. Bálint and Magyari (2020) conducted a qualitative study of 24 cancer victims using bibliotherapy as a tool to reveal the spiritual needs of patients in the oncologic clinical setting. For the study, spirituality was defined as "one's striving for and experience of connection with the essence of life" (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012, p. 9, as cited in Bálint and Magyari, 2020). Bálint and Magyari recruited participants for the study through the oncology medical staff, posters, leaflets, and Facebook posts. The study took place among Hungarian non-terminal cancer patients ages 28–60 years.

A total of three bibliotherapy groups were organized to meet weekly for 10 weeks in a dedicated room of an oncology center (Bálint & Magyari, 2020). The groups met in the morning from 10 a.m. to noon, with the general plan including a warmup task followed by listening to a fictional text read by the facilitator, discussion, and closing. Over the course of 10 weeks, the groups progressed through the steps of the initial phase of establishing group rules, building trust, and determining the interests of the group. During the second phase, longer, more complicated texts were addressed, and the third phase was the end of the group meetings.

Bálint and Magyari (2020) gathered data by analyzing the minutes of each group meeting and through the administration of the Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL; de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012, as cited in Bálint & Magyari, 2020), to gather feedback from participants. Results were organized according to the themes of connection to self, connection to others or nature, and connection with a transcendent other. The most prevalent spiritual needs revealed by the use of group bibliotherapy were personal quests, inner conflicts, and problems with participants' self-connection (Bálint & Magyari, 2020). A strength of the study was the role of bibliotherapy in exposing the unvoiced spiritual needs of patients. Once revealed, needs were addressed in the bibliotherapy groups, for the literature functioned as a tool for patients to project their thoughts and feelings.

Brewster and McNicol (2020) also conducted insightful research that informed the current study regarding connectedness. The style of bibliotherapy investigated in the qualitative study was the volunteer lead Words in Mind bibliotherapy that took place in Kirklees, United Kingdom; this form of bibliotherapy was developed for people with dementia or mental health issues. The study investigated the unique model developed to verbally engage people, with the goal of uncovering the unique elements of the model.

The groups were organized on the malady of dementia or mental health issues, and groups were designed to meet the needs of the participants as guided by the facilitator (Brewster & McNicol, 2020). Some of the dementia groups required that the facilitator take a more prominent role according to the level of disability of the group. To further engage participants in the dementia groups, facilitators included singing, games, and the stimulation of the senses with objects to touch or smell and food to taste.

The average number of bibliotherapy groups in progress during the 3-month research project was 39 (Brewster & McNicol, 2020). Groups had an average of six to eight people and met weekly, biweekly, or monthly for 1 or 2 hours. Volunteer bibliotherapy group leaders were trained as co-researchers; seven leaders completed observational templates to structure their experiences following bibliotherapy group meetings, completing 21 observations in all. Data were gathered through reflective observations, interviews, and document analysis. Brewster and McNicol formally interviewed 15 stakeholders, such as public library staff, community center managers, and mental health organization support workers, to triangulate the data.

Brewster and McNicol (2020) analyzed the data using the constant comparison approach, revealing five themes that described the structure of the Words in Mind bibliotherapy: person-centered bibliotherapy, resources and value judgments, co-production, contribution, and social connection. The theme of social connection was especially meaningful for the current study. For example, Interview 14 revealed that the bibliotherapy session allowed for conversation that was “deeper than general chat” (Brewster & McNicol, 2020, p. 7). Participants developed connections to the text and to others in their group, and the bibliotherapy group offered greater chances for deep discussion. The dementia groups also revealed the possibility for social connection, connections with the text, and the possible benefit of improved participant mood

following the session. The findings regarding bibliotherapy in Kirklees were useful, as the person-centered approach had a positive influence on people with mental health issues and dementia and revealed the possibility for participants to develop connections to the text and to others.

### **Conclusion**

Bibliotherapy has been used to benefit people of all ages for a little more than 100 years and has been found to be low in cost and widely accessible (Chamberlain, 2019; Brewster, 2018; Tavallaei et al., 2018). Bibliotherapy interventions eased the nighttime fears of young children and increased the likelihood of the children sleeping alone (Rafihi-Ferreira et al., 2018). Additionally, bibliotherapy can positively influence the reading skills and attitudes of disadvantaged adolescents (Tijms, 2018), ease symptoms of depression in adolescent females (Jacob & De Guzman, 2016), promote socio-emotional health in older adults (Chamberlain, 2019), and foster meaningful connections within reading groups (Malyn et al., 2020). Bibliotherapy helped adults decrease alcohol use (Connors et al., 2017), revealed the spiritual needs of cancer victims (Bálint & Magyari, 2020), and worked toward healing social problems in South Africa (Sheik, 2020). The current study has been designed to add to the body of literature on bibliotherapy and to examine its use to nurture social and emotional connectedness among retired adults. The methods used in the current study are described in Chapter 3.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. A description of the research design, participants, data collection, role of the researcher, measures for ethical protection, and data analysis follows.

#### **Description of Research Design**

The current study was a non-experimental, qualitative study of social connectedness among senior adults who participated in a virtual book study using Zoom technologies. A phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of connectedness among senior participants of a virtual book study in a church community. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research distills an experience to core meanings, ultimately resulting in a few main themes. A phenomenological design aligned seamlessly with the current research project and allowed common themes of social connectedness to emerge from interviews of participants as they shared their virtual book study experiences.

#### **Participants**

The participants in the current study were recruited from a medium-sized Protestant church in Central Florida; all seniors in the congregation were invited to sign up for the virtual book study. Nineteen people signed up for the book study, necessitating the creation of two small groups. The target research group consisted of 10 individuals 65 or older led by an experienced

facilitator. The second group was not involved in the current research study. At the beginning of the virtual book study, one member in the target research group dropped out, and one member contracted a serious case of COVID-19 and was no longer able to participate. In all, eight members of the target group attended every Zoom meeting; seven of the participant interviews were deemed appropriate for analysis.

### **Research Question**

What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy?

### **Data Collection**

After approval by the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University was received, a group of 10 senior adults (age 65 and older) was recruited from the congregation of a mid-sized Protestant church in Central Florida to participate in an 8-week virtual book study using Zoom technologies. Participants were recruited during two worship hours and via email (see Appendix A). The book study group was kept deliberately small to facilitate discussion.

The intervention in the current study consisted of a virtual book study for eight older adults who attended the church. Prior to the intervention, the researcher conducted a Zoom orientation session to familiarize the participants with ways to connect to the book study via Zoom and ways to interact in Zoom. A church elder conducted the book study for a total of four biweekly, 1-hour sessions to study and discuss the book *A Gentle Answer: Our "Secret Weapon" in an Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020). The book was chosen by the researcher in collaboration with the facilitator, the dissertation committee, and the church pastor. The content of the book focused on the role of Christians in a polarized society. The study was conducted via Zoom to reach senior adults who were sheltering at home due to concerns about COVID-19. Each Zoom meeting was audio- and video-recorded. Recordings were saved for future research

and data analyses.

After the virtual book study was completed, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of eight volunteers who participated in at least three of the four sessions of the book study and interviewed the facilitator as well. The interview questions (see Appendix B) were designed to gather data regarding the participants' perceptions of connectedness after the virtual book study. The researcher scheduled individual interviews via Zoom, with a planned duration of 30-45 minutes for each interview. The researcher also took notes and recorded the interview using Zoom. The Otter.ai application was used to prepare a transcript for each interview; then, the transcript was exported to Microsoft Word for subsequent data analyses.

### **Data Analyses**

The intervention in this study was the virtual book study. After the book study ended, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants and the facilitator. Seven interviews were deemed suitable for analysis. Transcripts of seven interviews were carefully reviewed, and each transcript was validated by the participant or facilitator.

After transcript validation, a codebook was created. Each transcript was analyzed for key phrases. These phrases were then compiled and analyzed to determine subthemes within the codebook. After the first codebook was developed, the dissertation methodologist reviewed the codes and made suggestions for collapsing subthemes and limiting the number of codes. The researcher followed the suggestions of the committee to collapse subthemes into main themes. Finally, commonalities between the individual and group themes were analyzed to provide a holistic overview of the senior adults' perceptions of connectedness during the book study.

### **Role of Researcher**

For the current study, the researcher sought to minimize bias through nonparticipation in the book study. Before the book study began, the researcher contacted each participant via Zoom to gauge technology proficiency and practice with the technology for members needing extra experience. A preview orientation was the only time the researcher interacted with the interview group on the Zoom platform. The purpose of the orientation was to ensure that all participants were able to connect and were relatively comfortable using Zoom to discuss the book and interact with other participants. The researcher's background in library science, as well as a lack of current experience in leading Zoom book studies, contributed to a non-biased role in the study.

Once the book study concluded, the researcher scheduled and conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant and the facilitator. All interviews took place via Zoom. The researcher asked each participant to choose a pseudonym, assured confidentiality, and used the questions approved by the dissertation committee for each interview (see Appendix B).

### **Measures for Ethical Protection**

The researcher informed participants that the virtual book study sessions and the semi-structured interviews were audio- and video-recorded. However, the recordings of the book study sessions were not addressed or analyzed in the current study.

Participants who were interviewed at the end of the book study were emailed the consent form prior to the virtual interview. Prior to the Zoom interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form and asked if the participant had any questions or concerns. A paper version of the consent form was signed at a later date (see Appendix C).

The participants in the book study were not informed of the specific purpose of the study since an open announcement of a study of connectedness might influence the overall tenor of the



discussions in the book study as well as the results of interviewees' responses to the interview questions. Instead, the interviewees were told that the study was focused on their perceptions of virtual book studies. The dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University approved this minor deception. In the invitation to the study, participants were also made aware of the book used in the book study and the duration of the study (see Appendix A). Potential risks in the study were minimal. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher asked the participant to choose a pseudonym. Following the interview, the researcher carefully reviewed and edited the transcript; then emailed the transcript to each interviewee for validation. All subsequent analyses and results presented in the dissertation used the assigned pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the subjects.

### **Summary**

The intervention, interviews, and data analyses in this study yielded a rich source of information regarding senior adults' perceptions of connectedness following bibliotherapy. A phenomenological research approach of distilling data to main themes was an ideal method to address the research question and yield meaningful results. The results of the analyses are presented in Chapter 4.

## IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. The intervention in the study consisted of an 8-week virtual book study for retired senior adults. This chapter includes an overview of data collection and analyses, findings by research question, and themes that emerged from the qualitative analyses.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

After approval by the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University was received, a group of 10 senior adults (ages 65 and older) was purposively selected based on age from 19 individuals who had signed up to participate in the book study. All participants attended a mid-sized Protestant church in Central Florida. The group met bimonthly for 8 weeks in a virtual book study using Zoom technologies. At the beginning of the book study, two of the 10 participants dropped out, leaving eight participants.

The virtual book study to discuss the book *A Gentle Answer: Our "Secret Weapon" in an Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020) was facilitated by a church elder. Eight senior adults participated in the virtual book study and volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher after the book study ended; seven interviews were deemed appropriate for analysis. Each of the interviewees had attended at least three of the four book study sessions. The facilitator was also interviewed. The Otter.ai application was used to prepare a transcript for each interview; then, the transcripts were exported to Microsoft Word for

subsequent data analyses. Each participant was asked to validate interview data transcripts. Transcripts were then analyzed through a coding system; then, categories were distilled to themes.

### **Participants**

Interviewees were recruited based on their age of 65 or older and retired work status; all participants who were interviewed were White and non-Hispanic. The interviewees attended the target church, yet many were not acquainted with each other. None of the members of the book study group had previously attended a virtual book study, and the group had varying levels of technical proficiency. The interviewees’ demographic information is presented in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Interviewees’ Demographics*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Anne	73	Female
Bob	65	Male
Doris	80	Female
Josh	80	Male
Laurie	71	Female
Paz	65	Female
Shorty	70	Female

The interviewees were retired from a variety of occupations and were actively pursuing diverse interests. Their commonality was membership and regular involvement in the target Central Florida church. Before retirement, Anne worked in architectural drafting. She is currently serving as the head of her homeowners’ association, as well as participating in women’s ministries and Sunday school. Each year, she heads up a toy drive that benefits children all over

the world.

Bob and Paz are married, retired scientists who are also active in Sunday school and the technology and music ministries at the church. Before settling in Central Florida to raise their children, they lived in the Midwest.

Doris worked in a large defense corporation as an education administrator before retiring. She currently serves on the board of a timeshare in Southwest Florida. She is an active investor in the stock market and is always ready to teach others about trading. Doris is actively involved with her family, regularly attends worship, and serves on the church finance committee.

Josh is a new resident in Central Florida. He and his wife moved from Central New York a few years ago to live with their daughter. While living in New York, Josh and his wife began a food ministry to serve the poor in the Upper Appalachia region and continued this ministry for 20 years. He is a retired firefighter.

For 30 years, Laurie worked as a worker's compensation adjustor but is now retired. She has lived in Central Florida since 1989 and is the third generation of her family to attend the target Central Florida church. She is active in music ministries and Sunday school.

Shorty recently joined the target church. She participates in women's ministries and Sunday school. Even though she takes care of her infirm husband, she occasionally finds time to paint artistic creations. Shorty was an elementary special education teacher and is now retired.

### **Findings by Research Question**

The current study was focused on one research question: What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy? To determine senior adults' perceptions of connectedness following bibliotherapy, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the subjects' responses were distilled for analysis. Seven interviews were deemed suitable for

analysis. Interviewees were asked to share the ways they connected with other people before the study. They were also asked about their experience in the online book study, discussions that stood out, and whether the study helped them understand people who held different values from their own. Finally, the subjects were asked about their connections to other participants during the study and their overall perceptions of the online book study. Qualitative analyses of the semi-structured interview transcripts are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Before the study, all interviewees reported that they connected with others face-to-face and via telephone. A few of the subjects used text, email, and FaceTime to communicate with people in their social circles. However, none of the interviewees had used Zoom to regularly connect with others. When asked about her perceptions of using Zoom for the book study, Doris reported a favorable impression, stating:

It was a new technology, a new way to communicate. So, I was excited about that, you know. My grandkids have been doing Zoom meetings and things, and since I'm no longer working, I feel like I'm in the 21st century.

Paz had a less favorable impression of using Zoom for the book study. Paz reported, "The technology did not seem to work for me. I ended up sharing a computer with Bob [another participant]. And I'm not sure why. I'm not used to Zoom, so it is probably lack of skill on my part."

All the interviewees said they looked forward to the online study, with the exception of one member who experienced technical issues. When asked if she looked forward to the Zoom book study meeting, Shorty said, "Yes, yes. Because I'm kind of lonely and don't have a lot of communication with people out and about." Laurie reported that she looked forward to the study for the reason of "just seeing everybody because I don't get out much."

Regarding her overall experience in the book study, Anne mentioned that her involvement was “positive. I was very happy to be pushed a little to read the book and understand it, and I enjoyed the experience overall.” The participants who reported a negative impression experienced technical issues that made it difficult for them to connect with the group or allow for conversation with group members.

When asked to describe a discussion that stood out during the Zoom book study, participants mentioned different exchanges, but the discussions had a similar focus: forgiveness. The interviewees mentioned discussions related to Sauls's (2020) descriptions of forgiveness after a church shooting and sexual abuse. In the book, Sauls described the massacre that took place in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Dylann Roof (a White man) entered a Black church, joined a prayer meeting, and then began shooting the congregants, killing nine. At the time of Roof's sentencing in court, numerous victims and victims' friends and families publicly forgave Roof for committing this violent act. Referring to the church shooting, Josh noted, “To be able to forgive a person like that is what Sauls [the author] wanted us to come to realize.”

Regarding the sexual abuse event, Sauls (2020) described the way gymnast Rachel Denhollander forgave athletic trainer Larry Nassar for repeatedly abusing her for years. Laurie commented:

When we discussed the gymnasts that forgave the doctor of all the Olympic gymnasts and how hard that must have been, I just loved what she [Rachel Denhollander] said. It wasn't a full forgiveness like she was God forgiving him; it was her forgiveness and telling him [the doctor] that God will judge.

When asked if the book helped to generate meaningful discussions and interactions, six of the participants responded “yes,” and one participant responded “no.” Shorty commented that

the meaningful discussions “helped me to think before I spoke; you know, the WWJD—What would Jesus do?” When Anne was asked if the book helped to foster meaningful interactions, she mentioned, “I guess our shared stories were certainly valuable to each other for friendship building.” Laurie was the only subject who felt the book did not generate meaningful interactions, largely due to technological difficulties she encountered; however, she indicated that she would participate in a virtual book study again in the future if she had improved technology.

The interviewees described the nature of the interactions that occurred during the book study as “polite and informative,” “pleasant,” and “agreeable.” When asked if participants in the book study engaged willingly, Doris commented, “Oh, no doubt. People would speak out.” Doris also noted that “she [the facilitator] left us plenty of room to add stuff.” Most participants reported that the discussions did not necessarily change their way of thinking about social issues that were highlighted during the book study. However, Josh commented that the discussions helped him to change his reactions to his politically extreme adult son. When Bob was asked if the discussions changed his way of thinking regarding social issues covered in the text, he mentioned that one of the participant’s interactions was particularly influential. He noted that “Josh really had a lot of input and thoughts and shared some of the experiences that he had, and how they related to the topic at hand.”

Interviewees were asked whether they formed new friendships during the Zoom book study. All agreed that they formed new acquaintances, but none of the interviewed participants believed that they formed new friendships. In a follow-up question, the members were asked if anything prevented them from forming new friendships. Bob commented, “It’s a lot different than being with another person face-to-face. And so, I think the Zoom had some limitations [with] that.” Josh shared an opposing view when he noted:

Zoom didn't prevent your knowing where a person was actually coming from by watching just their face. I thought it might be a little cold, but it's not. You get their personality through the Zoom. And they're understandable. And I enjoyed it.

Lastly, participants were asked to describe the differences between an in-person book study and a Zoom book study. Bob commented:

I think a lot of the body language is missing from Zoom. I mean, you can get people's looks of surprise or nods of agreement or whatever, but I don't think you get as full communication, and there were sometimes where the signals were not strong, and people weren't coming through clearly.

Laurie made an insightful comment regarding the differences between an in-person and Zoom study by saying:

I would still rather do an in-person [study], like a Sunday school class, because you have conversation afterwards. You walk to your car with somebody or whatever. But when this [Zoom Study] is over, it turns off, and everybody's gone.

Anne shared:

I tried to feel just like I was there. You know, this was the first time I did anything like this on Zoom. And I just decided, you know, what difference does that make with each other? We hear each other.

All participants appreciated the convenience of being able to engage in the book study from their homes; quite a few of the interviewees stated they preferred not to drive at night.

### **Themes**

Three themes were uncovered by the researcher during qualitative and cross-case analyses of the interview transcripts. These themes were a connection to self, connection to



others, and connection to the book/author; the intertwining nature of connectedness resulted in themes that occasionally overlapped. Examples of rich quotes that illustrate the themes follow.

### **Connection to Self**

The theme of connection to self became apparent as participants described their experiences in the virtual book study and the ways connection to self related to them personally. Two participants shared that the book demanded a self-examination of their personal values and the ways they were living their values. Other aspects of participant experiences were discernable in the way individuals spoke of personal responsibility, personal preference, and personal understanding. For example, both Josh and the facilitator mentioned the need to undergo a thorough self-examination as they read the book. Josh stated, “It [the book] makes you do a deep self-examination. If you’re honest with yourself, some of what you find inside yourself is unpleasant to realize.” The facilitator had an even stronger reaction to the text and shared, “The book, I thought, well, to me was like heart surgery. Literally, it was soul self-examination for me.” Through the process of self-examination, the facilitator recognized valuable points regarding personal responsibility:

I realized fully my values again, and I have made a promise to myself that when I speak to a person or I’m conversing with somebody, and I can tell right off that their values are different than mine, I need to close my mouth a little bit.

Interviewees further discussed personal responsibility and personal preferences. The facilitator mentioned that the discussions brought up aspects of personal responsibility. She said, “Sometimes we remain silent when we should speak.” The subtheme of personal responsibility also described a comment made by Paz. She mentioned:

I think the most important thing for me was the accountability [of participation in the

book study]. Just the limit that I knew I had to have it [preparation] done at a particular time. Okay, knowing that in 2 weeks, you had to have the two chapters read.

Josh discussed personal preferences regarding the book study experience, saying, “I like listening to each one that added anything to the conversation, and I could understand where they were coming from.” Shorty added, “I look forward to the interaction, seeing people, and just, you know, looking behind them to see their background décor. It [the book study] gave me something to look forward to.”

Bob encountered material from the text that he did not agree with, as well as text that he supported. He said, “I had to just realize, well, you know, I don’t agree with that, but the whole principle that he [the author] is talking about is a very good principle, and there’s a lot of good information to grow from.” Bob also mentioned, “I think that there was a lot of good information in it [the book]. And a lot about relationships. I’m trying to understand where people are coming from, and I think it’s [the book] good for anybody.”

Josh and Doris also gained a personal understanding. Josh mentioned that he was impressed with the way the author backed up his content with examples from the Bible, saying, “[Following the teachings of Christ] has been a pursuit of mine to try and actually live the teachings and be an imitation of Christ in my daily life—in my way of dealing with other people.” Doris shared that she struggled with current events and many Americans’ social and political views, saying:

I guess it [the book] made me really look at myself again, that I got to remember that I am a Christian. And that even where the left side of our country is right now, I don’t know where they’re coming from Christianity-wise. I still must be able to deal with them on a daily basis because they’re there. And that’s terrible because that’s the only conflict I

have in my life. That right now, I cannot believe that we have what we've got going on in our country.

### **Connection to Others**

The book study participants discussed their interactions with other members of the book study, as well as interactions that related to people outside of the book study group; both factors contributed to the development of the theme of connection to others. Analyses of the interview responses revealed that the Zoom format of the study influenced some participants' perceptions of connectedness with other members of the book study both positively and negatively.

Some of the interviewees missed aspects of a face-to-face book study. Shorty mentioned, "In a face-to-face study, there's more interaction with people, real people. And it's not always about the book." Josh noted, "So when you're all sitting around a table, and you kind of loosen up with one another, you're not afraid to question someone if they say something that you disagree with."

A few participants experienced a lack of connection related to the virtual environment of the book study. Laurie, who experienced a number of technical issues, stated that "I spoke very little because when I would start to talk, I knew they weren't hearing me, and then someone else would start. So, because of my computer system, I just didn't feel comfortable." Paz expressed:

I missed the connectivity of people. You know, even talking with you one-on-one or talking with my family one-on-one, there's a different dynamic than if you're sitting in a little box on the computer. And so, that was something that I missed. And I really didn't like the idea that I was on camera all the time.

Positive connections to others were described by the interviewees as those of interactions with the facilitator, the perceived value of participants' interactions, and interactions with other

group members. Paz noted, “The facilitator did a good job of finding value in whatever anybody said.” Other participants shared that the facilitator was “very good,” “a teacher,” and an “excellent facilitator.” According to the interviewees, the facilitator was adept at engaging the group in relevant discussions about the book. Shorty mentioned that “It wasn’t hard to get into the conversation.” Doris shared, “She led us and kept us focused on what we were dealing with. And she made sure everybody that had anything to say had time to say it.” However, Bob noted that occasionally the facilitator did not have an easy job. He shared, “She had to work at it,” regarding encouraging others to engage in conversation.

Participants also valued the ideas of other group members. Doris stated:

If I’d been doing it [the book study] myself, I don’t know that I would have gotten this much from it. Because I would have read it, put the book down, and that would have been it. This way, we had discussions, and sometimes you would look at something a little different because somebody else had a different perspective. And I liked that.

“Josh made an impact on me,” noted Paz. “He is just a very, first of all, an interesting person. But he is very full of faith. And then, that made an impact on me,” she shared. Laurie stated, “I got to know people that I didn’t know before. And so, I recognized them in church then the next week.” Anne also mentioned additional in-person interactions as a result of participation in the online study: “I feel like there’s a couple of people [from the book study] that are making sure they speak to me now in church, you know, maybe we didn’t before.”

Shorty and Bob also commented about the familiarity that the online study brought about so that in-person interactions were more meaningful. Both of the following interactions took place at the same church event and were shared with the researcher during the semi-structured interviews. Shorty said:

There's one person at the fish fry. And I talked to him. And I said, "You did the book study?" Yes. And we talked there. And then the other lady, there was another lady that came up ... [She said], "Oh, it's so nice to meet you in person."...I don't know that many people at the church. I know faces, and I don't know their names, and it just was very nice to be able to meet them in person. You know, kind of strike up a conversation.

Bob commented:

Shorty, I know I have met before. And at the fish fry, she was there, and I was just kind of taking reservations or checking people off the list, and so I asked her name, and she said, "Shorty," and I said, "Oh yeah, I recognize you." So that was one [example of] that, you know, just new external exposure [brings about] a little bit more familiarity with people.

The book study discussions appeared to help the facilitator and participants to understand others who hold different values. The facilitator noted, "I read that if you are having a conversation and you've realized that you're on a different wavelength from the person you're talking to, just say, 'I'd like for you to think about that a little bit more.'" Related to understanding people with different values, Josh noted, "Understand them, yes. I certainly will be able to tolerate them better." Previously, Josh shared that participation in the online book study helped him to relate to his politically extreme son. Josh further described this by mentioning:

I was hoping this book would help me find a better answer to give to my son, but a gentle answer does not always fit into that kind of a subject other than to say I understand where you're coming from. I disagree with you. But I hope that someday you would look at what's happening on the other side of that story and then make a decision.

Bob shared:

I did get some better understanding [of others], and sometimes I tend to be a bit quick to judge people's motivations and not really think about where they're coming from, and I think it just helps me to be more aware that I'm not in their shoes and to determine what's going on in their lives that's causing frustrations over anything else.

Bob shared further comments about interactions and relationships. He commented, "If we're trying to improve or develop a relationship, we need to be thoughtful about what we say."

### **Connection to the Book/Author**

*A Gentle Answer: Our "Secret Weapon" in an Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020) was viewed by the participants as having meaningful content that contributed to robust discussions during the online book study. Interviewees commented on numerous aspects of the book's content, both agreeing and disagreeing with specific points made by the author. In general, the interviewees widely recommended the book. Doris shared:

If you were raised in the church, we've always known all of this [the content]. It [the book] just reiterated and reminded us that God loves all of us as sinners, and He's willing to forgive us. It [the book] has just been a reminder of lifelong lessons.

Paz stated, "It [the book] was a good review of other things that I've read about interactions and getting along with people." Shorty noted:

I liked the book more than I did not like the book. Like I said, there were some things that I didn't agree with. He [the author] had some opinions in there. I liked the first two chapters, where I learned about the men of the Bible and how Jesus handled certain situations.

Bob stated:

Well, in terms of the study itself, I thought the study was good. There were a lot of good points that Sauls brought up. I think there were maybe some conclusions that he was jumping to or some things that he stated that I didn't quite agree with.

Anne shared, "The book was really a good source of new information. I think to a lot of us, things we hadn't really thought of before. I think it was providing a lot of great material to talk about."

When asked about the value of the content of the book, the interviewees responded positively. For example, Bob shared:

Yes, in fact, I have. I think that there is a lot of good information in it. And a lot about relationships. I'm trying to understand where people are coming from, and I think it's good for anybody. And I think it would be really helpful for my friend as well.

Anne stated, "Oh, yeah, I already have [recommended the book]. I used it, in fact, a couple of times now. Also, in a little presentation I did." Laurie stated, "Yes—somebody said, 'Oh, I can't forgive,' you know, in a conversation, 'I have trouble with forgiveness.' I said, 'I've got a book for you.'"

All interviewees indicated that they would like to participate or would consider participating in a future online book study. The interviewees who were unsure of their response to the interview question specified that their future involvement would hinge on the book to be discussed. Interviewees also appreciated that the virtual study allowed them to meet with others from their homes. Paz noted:

I liked the ability to not have to leave my house; I didn't have to drive anywhere at night. I'm getting older, and I don't like to drive at night—that type of thing. So, it was convenient in that regard.

The results of the study are discussed further in Chapter 5. The steps taken by the researcher to maintain the integrity of the study are discussed next.

### **Evidence of Quality**

The current study adhered to the following procedures to ensure the quality of research design, implementation, analysis, reporting, and qualitative phenomenological standards. The dissertation committee was involved in creating and refining the research design, methods, book selection, and interview questions to strengthen the study. Institutional review board approval was obtained prior to conducting the book study intervention to ensure that appropriate ethical standards were followed during the implementation of the study. The book study participants were all volunteers; consent forms were shared with each member of the intervention group, and each participant had the opportunity to ask questions and to choose a pseudonym to be used in the written report of the study to ensure confidentiality. In the consent form, the participants were told that the purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of virtual technologies for book studies. This minor deception was used to prevent the possibility of contamination of the subject pool if the actual purpose of the study, to examine the perceptions of social connectedness, was known. According to the regulations described by institutional review boards, the level of risk in this qualitative study was considered minimal.

The current study adhered to qualitative phenomenological standards regarding the research question, participant descriptions, transcripts, and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research question was: What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after



bibliotherapy? The question inquired about the human experience of connectedness for senior adults after bibliotherapy following the phenomenological model. Within the study, connectedness was explored within theoretical frameworks and current social research and in experiential examples of participants. The current researcher reported participant descriptions directly from transcripts to ensure that participant experiences were reflected accurately. Transcripts were verified by each participant for precision, and analyses were performed on the participant transcripts using a coding system; codes were distilled to themes, a process recommended for phenomenological research. The three general themes that emerged were generated from the interview transcripts and can be traced back directly to participant transcripts.

Interview data were stored on a password-protected computer and were shared only with the dissertation committee chair and methodologist. The committee members also participated in determining the major themes and subthemes from the interviewees' transcripts as well as the report of the study. These efforts helped to ensure the overall quality of the study and its reports.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness. The research question was "What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy?" The intervention used to explore the research question was a virtual book study that took place via Zoom; seven retired adults took part in the virtual book study and were interviewed at the end of the study. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of connectedness among participants of the virtual book study; interview responses were distilled to core meanings. An analysis of the interview data resulted in three major themes: connection to self, connection to others, and connection to the book/author. The results of the study are discussed in Chapter 5.

## V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness; the intervention in the study consisted of an 8-week virtual book study for retired senior adults. This chapter includes a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks undergirding the study, data collection and analyses, descriptions of the participants, a summary and discussion of the results, and a discussion of the research question. Also included are implications for practice, recommendations for future research, study limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Social connectedness, the key variable in the current study, refers to individuals' perceptions of experiencing close, affirming relationships with others (Seppala et al., 2013, p. 412). The following theories guided the development of the current research study: the psychosocial development theories of Erik Erikson (1959/1994), the attachment theories of Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth et al. (1978), and recent neurological studies related to social interactions (Lieberman, 2013). All three theoretical frameworks underpin a comprehensive model for exploring social connectedness among older adults using bibliotherapy. During bibliotherapy, people connect cognitively and emotionally with text and authors; they also connect with others in meaningful discussions of key ideas in the text and the ways those ideas connect to life.

## Methods of Data Collection

After approval from the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University, a group of 10 senior adults was recruited from an initial group of 19 individuals who were interested in participating in the virtual book study. The 10 adults were selected to participate based on their age (65 years or older) and their status as retired individuals. All participants attended a mid-sized Protestant church in Central Florida and engaged every other week for 8 weeks in a virtual book study using Zoom technologies. At the beginning of the course, two participants dropped out, leaving eight participants.

The virtual book study was facilitated by a church elder who led the study and discussions of the book *A Gentle Answer: Our "Secret Weapon" in an Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020). All participants received individualized Zoom training before the book study started. Eight senior adults attended at least three out of four book study sessions. Each of the senior adults volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher after the book study ended; seven interviews were deemed appropriate for analysis. The facilitator was also interviewed. The Otter.ai application was used to prepare a transcript for each interview, and the transcript was exported to Microsoft Word for subsequent data analyses. Each participant was asked to validate the interview transcripts. After validation, the participants' names were changed to the pseudonyms they requested. Transcripts were then analyzed using qualitative coding procedures to determine key statements, broad categories, and themes from the data. The data were then cross-case analyzed to uncover the commonalities of the group, which were distilled to themes.

## Participants

All the interviewees were retired from a variety of occupations and were actively pursuing diverse interests. Their commonality was membership and regular involvement in the target Central Florida church. When interviewed, each participant was asked a series of questions (see Appendix B) related to the book study and connectedness.

Before retirement, Anne worked in architectural drafting. She currently serves as the head of her homeowners' association, and she participates in women's ministries and Sunday school. Bob and Paz are married, retired scientists who are also active in Sunday school and the technology and music ministries at the church.

Prior to retirement, Doris worked in a large defense corporation as an education administrator. She currently serves on the board of a timeshare in Southwest Florida. She is an enthusiastic investor in the stock market and is always ready to teach others about trading. Doris is actively involved with her family, regularly attends worship, and serves on the church finance committee.

Josh is a new resident in Central Florida. He and his wife moved from Central New York a few years ago to live with their daughter. While living in New York, Josh and his wife began a food ministry for the underserved in the Upper Appalachia region and continued this ministry for 20 years. He is a retired firefighter.

Laurie worked as a worker's compensation adjustor for 30 years. She has lived in Central Florida since 1989 and is the third generation of her family to attend the target Central Florida church. She is active in music ministries and Sunday school.

Shorty recently joined the target church. She has participated in women's ministries and Sunday school. Even though she takes care of her infirm husband, she occasionally finds time to

paint artistic creations. Shorty was an elementary special education teacher and is now retired.

### **Summary of Results**

The researcher formulated seven interview questions (see Appendix B) with the help of the dissertation committee. The questions were designed to explore participants' perceptions of group interactions and connectedness following the bibliotherapy intervention.

### **Discussion by Research Question**

The current study was focused on one research question: What are senior adults' perceptions of connectedness after bibliotherapy? Interviewees were asked to share the ways they connected with other people before the study, their experience in the online book study, discussions that stood out, and whether the study helped them understand people who held different values from their own. Finally, the subjects were asked about their connections to other participants during the study and their overall perceptions of the online book study.

At the beginning of the study, participants were told the purpose of the study was to gauge their perceptions of participation in an online book study. This minor deception was considered necessary to avoid influencing participants' ideas related to the true purpose of the study, which was connectedness. As a result of the deception, participants often focused their responses on their perceptions of the virtual book experience rather than their perceptions of connectedness. However, participant interviews did provide some unbiased experiences of connection. Qualitative analyses of the semi-structured interview transcripts are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Before the study, all interviewees reported that they connected with others face-to-face and via telephone. A few of the subjects used text, email, and FaceTime to communicate with people in their social circles. However, none of the interviewees used Zoom to regularly connect

with others. Using Zoom to interact with others was a new experience for most participants.

Perceptions of using the new tool (i.e., Zoom) were both negative and positive. Josh mentioned, “I didn’t feel like we could do that [easily interact] on Zoom so much because when one person speaks, it shuts everybody else off.” Josh commented that he was using the speaker view on Zoom and might have engaged more satisfactorily if he had used the gallery view to visually see the speaker as well as the other group members and their reactions. When asked about her perceptions of using Zoom for the book study, Doris reported a favorable impression, stating:

It was a new technology, a new way to communicate. So, I was excited about that, you know. My grandkids have been doing Zoom meetings and things, and since I’m no longer working, I feel like I’m in the 21st century.

All the interviewees said they looked forward to the online study, with the exception of one member, Paz, who experienced technical difficulties. When asked if she looked forward to the Zoom book study meeting, Shorty said, “Yes, yes. Because I’m kind of lonely, and don’t have a lot of communication with people out and about.” Laurie reported that she looked forward to the study because “just seeing everybody because I don’t get out much.”

Regarding the participants’ overall experience in the book study, five interviewees expressed having a good experience in the virtual book study, and two had an unsatisfactory experience overall. Both participants who reported negative impressions experienced technical issues that made it difficult for them to connect with the group or allow for conversation with group members.

When asked to describe a discussion that stood out during the Zoom book study, participants mentioned different exchanges, but the responses to the interview question had a

similar focus: forgiveness. The interviewees mentioned discussions related to Sauls's (2020) descriptions of forgiveness. Referring to a church shooting, Josh noted, "To be able to forgive a person like that is what Sauls [the author] wanted us to come to realize." Laurie recalled the virtual discussion based on the book's account of a group of Olympic gymnasts and the forgiveness extended to one of the Olympic doctors who had been charged with illicit behavior:

When we discussed the gymnasts that forgave the doctor of all the Olympic gymnasts and how hard that must have been, I just loved what she [Rachel Denhollander] said. It wasn't a full forgiveness like she was God forgiving him. It was her forgiveness and telling him [the athletic trainer] that God will judge.

When asked if the book helped to generate meaningful discussions and interactions, six of the participants responded, "Yes," and one participant responded, "No." Shorty commented that the meaningful discussions "helped me to think before I spoke, you know, the WWJD—What would Jesus do?" When Anne was asked if the book helped to foster meaningful interactions, she mentioned, "I guess our shared stories were certainly valuable to each other for friendship building." Laurie was the only subject who felt the book did not generate meaningful interactions, largely due to technological difficulties she encountered; however, she indicated that she would participate in a virtual book study again in the future if she had improved technology.

The interviewees described the nature of the interactions that occurred during the book study as "polite and informative," "pleasant," and "agreeable." Most participants reported that the discussions did not necessarily change their thinking about social issues that were highlighted during the book study. However, Josh commented that the discussions helped him to change his reactions to his politically extreme adult son.

Interviewees were asked whether they formed new friendships during the Zoom book

study. All agreed that they formed new acquaintances, but none of the participants believed that they formed new friendships. In a follow-up question, the researcher asked if anything prevented them from forming new friendships. Bob commented, “It’s [discussion is] a lot different than being with another person face-to-face. And so, I think the Zoom had some limitations [with] that.” Josh shared an opposing view when he noted,

Zoom didn’t prevent your knowing where a person was actually coming from by watching just their face. I thought it might be a little cold, but it’s not. You get their personality through the Zoom. And they’re understandable. And I enjoyed it.

Lastly, participants were asked to describe the differences between an in-person book study and a Zoom book study. Bob commented:

I think a lot of the body language is missing from Zoom. I mean, you can get people’s looks of surprise or nods of agreement or whatever, but I don’t think you get as full communication, and there were sometimes where the signals were not strong, and people weren’t coming through clearly.

Laurie made an insightful comment regarding the differences between an in-person and a Zoom study by saying, “I would still rather do an in-person [study], like a Sunday school class, because you have conversation afterwards. You walk to your car with somebody or whatever. But when this [Zoom session] is over, it turns off, and everybody’s gone.”

All book study participants reported the convenience of being able to engage in the book study from their homes. One interviewee stated she preferred not to drive at night.

Participants’ responses to the interview questions were transcribed, coded, and analyzed qualitatively to determine categories of individual themes. The categories were then cross-analyzed and distilled to three major themes that are discussed in the section that follows.



## Themes

Three themes were uncovered by the researcher during qualitative and cross-case analyses of the interview transcripts. These themes were a connection to self, connection to others, and connection to the book/author.

Interestingly, the three themes uncovered in the current study aligned strongly with research conducted by Malyn et al. (2020) who conducted semi-structured interviews of 12 bibliotherapy senior adults in Great Britain. Thematic analyses of the interview data revealed four primary themes: relationship to self (the perception of self as an older adult and a sense of personal achievement for participating in the book study's group activities), relationship to others (the sense of connectedness that developed within the book study groups), relationship to the facilitator (perceptions of the role of the facilitator to value and accept participants), and relationship to intermediary objects (reading and writing became a tool for participants to express their thoughts and emotions).

Each of the three themes generated in the current study included elements of connection: to self, to others, and to the book or author. Occasionally the three themes overlapped. A discussion of the three themes follows.

### **Theme 1: Connection to Self**

The theme of *connection to self* became apparent as participants described their experiences in the virtual book study and the ways the experiences related to them personally. Two participants shared that the book demanded self-examination of their personal values and the ways they were living their values. Other aspects of participant experiences were discernable in the way individuals spoke of personal responsibility and personal preference.

Josh stated, "It [the book] makes you do a deep self-examination. If you're honest with

yourself, some of what you find inside yourself is unpleasant to realize.” The facilitator had an even stronger reaction to the text, saying, “The book, I thought, well, to me was like heart surgery. Literally, it was soul self-examination for me.” Through the process of self-examination, the facilitator recognized valuable points regarding personal responsibility:

I realized fully my values again, and I have made a promise to myself that when I speak to a person or I’m conversing with somebody, and I can tell right off that their values are different than mine, I need to close my mouth a little bit.

The facilitator also mentioned that the book study discussions helped her to connect to personal responsibility. She said, “Sometimes we remain silent when we should speak.” The subtheme of personal responsibility was also described in a comment made by Paz. She mentioned:

I think the most important thing for me was the accountability [of participation in the book study]. I knew I had to have it [preparation] done at a particular time. Okay, knowing that in 2 weeks, you had to have two chapters read [and be ready to discuss].

Josh discussed a personal preference regarding the book study experience, sharing, “I like listening to each one who added anything to the conversation, and I could understand where they were coming from.”

The theme of connection to self in the current study is aligned strongly with Erikson’s theory of social and emotional development, one of the study’s theoretical frameworks. Erikson’s (1984) last stage of psychosocial development, old age, is typically characterized by the human quest for integrity versus despair. Beginning at approximately age 65 and progressing to death, this final stage is distinguished by questioning whether life has been well-lived, with the hopeful outcome of wisdom, personality integration, and contentment. Erikson also recognized the need

for generativity and purpose in the later stages of adult development to promote a sense of purpose. The interview evidence related to the theme of connection to self suggests that the senior adults in this study were actively seeking connections and applications to their lives and were engaged in evaluating their own thoughts and behaviors during and after reading and discussing the book. The participants in this study were actively involved in the process of validating and integrating the reading and discussions into their existing cognitive and psychosocial make-up. In addition, the senior adults in this study were adventurous and willing to try new methods of communicating with others, indicating resilience. Rather than descending into despair as they aged, these seniors found new avenues for understanding the views of others and new strategies for navigating an increasingly divided culture.

Recent research by Pettersson (2018) explored Swedish adults' experiences in reading circles to determine whether involvement in book study groups contributed to the psychological well-being of adults with long-term depression and anxiety. Four participants attended a reading circle held 2 hours a week for 12 weeks in 2015. Prior to each reading circle session, the participants read selected short stories or poems individually, similar to the current study. During the reading circles, the Swedish group members read some of the texts aloud and engaged in discussions. The subjects were interviewed individually, and the responses were analyzed qualitatively. Pettersson's results directly related to two interview comments in the current study: Josh and Doris stated they appreciated the opportunity to gain an understanding of the text by listening and thinking about the comments of others. Notably, all the participants in Pettersson's study reported they found greater value in listening to others' ideas and gaining new understanding than in sharing their own ideas. The value of interactions with others is further addressed in the section that follows.

## Theme 2: Connection to Others

The current book study participants discussed the interactions and connections with other members of the book study, as well as interactions that related to people outside the book study group; both dynamics contributed to the development of the theme of *connection to others*. Analyses of the interview responses revealed that the Zoom format of the study influenced participants' perceptions of connectedness with other members of the book study, both positively and negatively.

Some of the interviewees missed aspects of a face-to-face book study. For example, Shorty mentioned, "In a face-to-face study, there's more interaction with people, real people. And it's not always about the book." Josh noted, "So when you're all sitting around a table, and you kind of loosen up with one another, you're not afraid to question someone if they say something that you disagree with."

A few participants experienced a lack of connection related to the virtual environment of the book study. Laurie, who experienced a number of technical issues, stated, "I spoke very little because when I would start to talk, I knew they weren't hearing me, and then someone else would start. So, because of my computer system, I just didn't feel comfortable." Paz noted:

I missed the connectivity of people. You know, even talking with you one-on-one or talking with my family one-on-one, there's a different dynamic than if you're sitting in a little box on the computer. And so, that was something that I missed. And I really didn't like the idea that I was on camera all the time.

The interviewees described positive connections to others as interactions with the facilitator, the value of participants' interactions, and interactions with other people who did not attend the book study. Paz noted, "The facilitator did a good job of finding value in whatever

anybody said.” Other interviewees shared that the facilitator was “very good,” “a teacher,” and an “excellent facilitator.” According to the participants, the facilitator was adept at engaging the group in relevant discussions about the book. Shorty mentioned, “It wasn’t hard to get into the conversation.” Doris shared, “She led us and kept us focused on what we were dealing with. And she made sure everybody that had anything to say had time to say it.” However, Bob noted that occasionally the facilitator did not have an easy job. He shared that “she had to work at it” to encourage others to engage in conversation. These comments support the results of the study by Malyn et al. (2020), who had uncovered a similar subtheme of connection to the facilitator among senior adults during bibliotherapy.

The current book study participants valued the discussions and ideas of other group members. Doris stated:

If I’d been doing it [the book study] myself, I don’t know that I would have gotten this much from it. Because I would have read it, put the book down, and that would have been it. This way, we had discussions, and sometimes you would look at something a little different because somebody else had a different perspective. And I liked that.

The book study discussions appeared to help the facilitator and participants to understand and honor others who hold different values. Related to understanding people with different values, Josh noted, “Understand them, yes. I certainly will be able to tolerate them better.” Previously, Josh shared that participation in the online book study helped him to relate to his politically extreme son. Josh mentioned:

I was hoping this book would help me find a better answer to give to my son, but a gentle answer does not always fit into that kind of a subject, other than to say I understand where you’re coming from. I disagree with you, but I hope that someday you would look

at what's happening on the other side of that story and then make a decision.

Bob shared:

I did get some better understanding [of others], and sometimes I tend to be a bit quick to judge people's motivations and not really think about where they're coming from. I think it just helps me to be more aware that I'm not in their shoes and to determine what's going on in their lives that's causing frustrations over anything else.

One of the theoretical frameworks undergirding the current study is the work of Lieberman (2003). In his book, *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect*, Lieberman described neurological studies that revealed the ways social connectedness is associated with three neural networks in the brain: connection, mindreading, and harmonizing. Connection refers to the ability of a person "to feel social pains and pleasures" (Lieberman, 2003, p. 11) that drive social connectedness from infancy to old age. Lieberman (2003) defined mindreading as the "ability to understand the actions and thoughts of" (p. 11) others, an attribute that also contributes to social connectedness. Lastly, harmonizing was defined as the adaptation that allows for the influence of others to help form an individual's beliefs and values (Lieberman, 2003, p. 12). The participants in the current study demonstrated social connectedness to others: connecting with the facilitator, other group members, and people outside the book study group; mindreading by engaging with the ideas of others; and harmonizing by being open to the book's content and the group members' ideas and comments to influence and possibly change or adapt behaviors and ideas.

### **Theme 3: Connection to the Book/Author**

*A Gentle Answer: Our "Secret Weapon" in an Age of Us Against Them* by Scott Sauls (2020) was viewed by the participants as presenting meaningful content that contributed to

robust discussions during the online book study. Interviewees commented on numerous aspects of the book's content, both agreeing and disagreeing with specific points made by the author. All the interviewees recommended the book.

Bob stated, "There were a lot of good points that Sauls [the author] brought up. I think there were maybe some conclusions that he was jumping to or some things that he stated that I didn't quite agree with." Anne shared, "The book was really a good source of new information; I think to a lot of us, things we hadn't really thought of before. I think it [the book] was providing a lot of great material to talk about."

When asked about the value of the content of the book, the interviewees responded positively. For example, Bob reported he had shared the book with a friend:

Yes, in fact, I have [shared the book]. I think that there is a lot of good information in it. And a lot about relationships. I'm trying to understand where people are coming from, and I think it's good for anybody. And I think it would be really helpful for my friend as well.

Anne stated, "Oh, yeah, I already have [recommended the book]. I used it, in fact, a couple of times now. Also, in a little presentation I did." Laurie mentioned, "Yes—somebody said, 'Oh, I can't forgive [someone or some behavior]' you know, in a conversation. [They said] 'I have trouble with forgiveness.' I said, 'I've got a book for you.'" Sharing the book with others outside the book study affirmed the value of the book's content to the participants as well as their experiences in bibliotherapy. Sharing the book was also an example of the second theme of connection to others outside the book study group.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one of the primary themes uncovered in Malyn et al.'s (2020) study of bibliotherapy among older adults was the importance of an intermediary

object, such as the reading and writing discussed during group time. Many book study groups focus on texts and discussion. In those cases, the selection of the text is critically important to engage learners of all ages. The text must encourage close reading, robust conversations, new ideas related to the text, and ah-ha moments of insights and understanding. In Malyn et al.'s study, both reading and writing were tools for participants to express their thoughts and emotions, either privately through journaling or in groups through sharing and discussion. According to the interviewees in the current study, Sauls's (2020) text generated engaging discussions in each book study meeting and led to new acquaintances within the church.

In addition, Zoom technology allowed subjects to participate in the online study from home and express their thoughts and emotions regarding the text. The technology itself appeared to mediate participants' engagement and online interactions and their perceptions of connectedness with others, especially for participants who experienced technical difficulties during the book study meetings.

All interviewees in the current study indicated that they would like to participate or would consider participating in a future online book study. The interviewees who were unsure about participating in another online book study specified that their future involvement would hinge on the book to be discussed, another example of the importance of the mediating object. Interviewees also appreciated that the virtual study allowed them to meet with others from their homes and eliminated the need to drive at night, a problem for many older adults.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness, with the goal of creating a model to guide the future implementation of online book studies. As mentioned earlier, the results of the current study



strongly aligned with a qualitative study of bibliotherapy among older adults. Malyn et al. (2020) examined the use of weekly meetings for recreational bibliotherapy coupled with creative writing in London, England. Thematic analyses of interview data uncovered four primary themes: relationship to self (the perception of self as an older adult and a sense of personal achievement for participating in the book study's group activities); relationships to others (the sense of connectedness that developed within the individuals in book study groups); relationship to the facilitator (perceptions of the role of the facilitator's valuing and accepting participants), and relationships to intermediary objects (reading and writing as tools for participants to express their thoughts and emotions). The current study yielded very similar results and served to augment the research on bibliotherapy's use among senior adults.

Vital information gleaned from participant interviews in the current study served to develop an adult-oriented, online implementation model to foster connectedness during times of isolation through bibliotherapy. Principles of adult learning (andragogy) are critically important to consider when developing a model for implementation of any book study (Knowles, 1988; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). The researcher suggests the implementation of the following principles to meet the needs of adult learners in a book study:

- participant involvement in planning the book study, especially with regard to dates and times for book study sessions,
- convenient and timely sessions, whether virtual or face to face,
- selection of relevant and immediately practical book content,
- careful selection of the facilitator to ensure robust discussions and participant interactions,
- numerous opportunities for multiple participants to share experiences,

- creative activities and experiences to ensure book study members' engagement with the book's content and with the group,
- problem-centered discussion focused on solutions and ideas, and
- assurance of confidentiality during discussion.

To effectively engage seniors in developing connections with others through bibliotherapy, certain technical, engagement, and practical strategies should be addressed. The sections that follow include lessons learned from the current study to inform the key elements of the proposed implementation model for engaging senior adults in bibliotherapy.

### **Technical Training**

To foster optimal online social environments, technical training should occur before and during future group studies for both the facilitator and participants. For the current study, the facilitator used online facilitator training videos to prepare for the book study and also practiced with the researcher. The facilitator was adept at using basic Zoom options. To better support facilitators in the future, more advanced Zoom tools, such as the Zoom breakout room options, could be integrated after the first few meetings when the participants have gained a moderate level of comfort using Zoom.

In the current study, the researcher contacted each participant to gauge Zoom proficiency and to work through any technical problems before the study began. Even though each participant had individualized technology training and support, one book study participant continued to experience difficulties due to the age of her computer equipment. To ensure future success, the sponsoring organization could consider obtaining and loaning current laptops for participants with older computers.

Participants would benefit from continued Zoom training throughout the study to better

connect by using the chat feature. In addition, instruction was needed to encourage users to switch to the gallery view versus the speaker view to better view all participants and perhaps feel more connected to the group. According to the participants in the book study, the Zoom technology effectively served to connect the facilitator and most of the group members to promote discussion during the online study. Connecting with others and discussing the chosen book was important enough for participants to learn to use new technology.

### **Engagement Strategies**

This element of the model was supported by the attachment theories of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who concluded that attachment to others was a key factor in healthy personality development and general wellbeing (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 340). In addition, Lieberman's (2003) research on the need for connectedness provided strong foundations for understanding and promoting the human need for social, emotional, and spiritual connections with others, whether face-to-face or online.

Engagement should be an essential consideration when designing future book studies. One of the key results in the current study was the importance of the mediating object, the book, for motivating regular attendance and for generating discussion. Future online book studies must ensure that the book choice offers relevant and timely information, encourages rich discussions, and stimulates aha moments. The importance of the book selection cannot be overstated, as material in the book stimulates connections to prior knowledge and experiences.

The length of required reading in bibliotherapy was also important to the individuals in the current study. Bálint and Magyari (2020) found that content and relatively short lengths of required reading were equally important for participants. Engaging, developmentally appropriate material can foster personal growth. In the current study, Doris supported the value of

engagement by stating:

If I'd have been doing it myself, I don't know that I would have gotten this much from it. Because I would have read it, put the book down, and that would have been it. This way, we had discussions, and sometimes you would look at something a little different because somebody else had a different perspective. And I like that.

The seniors in the current study reported that they missed social interactions before or after the book study began. In future book studies, the facilitator could designate social time 15-20 minutes prior to or after the book study to encourage seniors to socialize and develop connections with others. Zoom technologies could support both learning and recreational conversations. In addition, journaling or creative writing after the conclusion of each book study session could be added to the book study activities to stimulate reflection on the book's content and also the discussions. The writing could then be shared and discussed at the next book study meeting to provide opportunities for group members to describe their personal connections and to discuss the practical applications of new learning in their daily lives.

### **Practical Strategies**

Any model of bibliotherapy must consider a number of practical strategies to foster social connectedness among participants in future online book studies. In the current study, participants met each other face-to-face after the study concluded. An in-person meeting before the study began would enable participants to become acquainted and build trust; in this way, critical conversations and connectedness would continue to grow during the weekly book study sessions.

The selection of the facilitator for any book study is critically important. The individuals chosen to facilitate bibliotherapy groups should be trained in specific strategies designed to create a safe place for authentic communication and sharing within groups. At the very beginning

of the book study, the facilitator must address the need for confidentiality so that participants can be confident that their comments will not be shared with people outside the book study.

Facilitators are often the boundary keepers during discussions and should be well-versed in interpersonal communication and civil discourse. Finally, every facilitator must be willing to accept and affirm each group member equally.

The amount of reading required per book study session is another practical detail that must be carefully addressed. Bob mentioned, “One of the things that I wish we would have had is a little bit more time to go over the material; doing two chapters in 1 hour [during weekly Zoom meetings], it was a bit of a challenge.” Less reading material per session or more sessions would encourage readers to think deeply about the material, reduce anxiety regarding the amount of material to be discussed in a short period of time, and encourage deep dives into the material during discussions.

Some participants reported barriers to building social connections during the book study. Most of the reported barriers were related to the time frame of the study. The current study took place over an 8-week period, with four Zoom meetings of 1 hour each. When Doris was asked what prevented her from developing friendships or acquaintances during the study, she commented, “I think it would take more than just four sessions and a couple of hours.” For the purposes of building social connections, more sessions and more time in each session should be considered. The number of the group meetings in studies by Chamberlain (2019) and Bálint and Magyari (2020) were held weekly over a 10-week time period, a term recommended for future studies. Additionally, small group size should be maintained. Bálint and Magyari (2020) recommended group size of five to 12 participants to enhance the environment for social interaction. For the same purpose, Malyn et al. (2020) also instituted a cap of 12 participants in

their bibliotherapy groups.

Overall, online book study sessions in the current study met a need for senior adults during a period of social isolation due to the pandemic. All the participants commented that they liked being part of the study and that not having to leave their homes was a distinct benefit. In addition, new technology and acquaintances were developed over time. All the bibliotherapy group members stated they would participate in a future online book study.

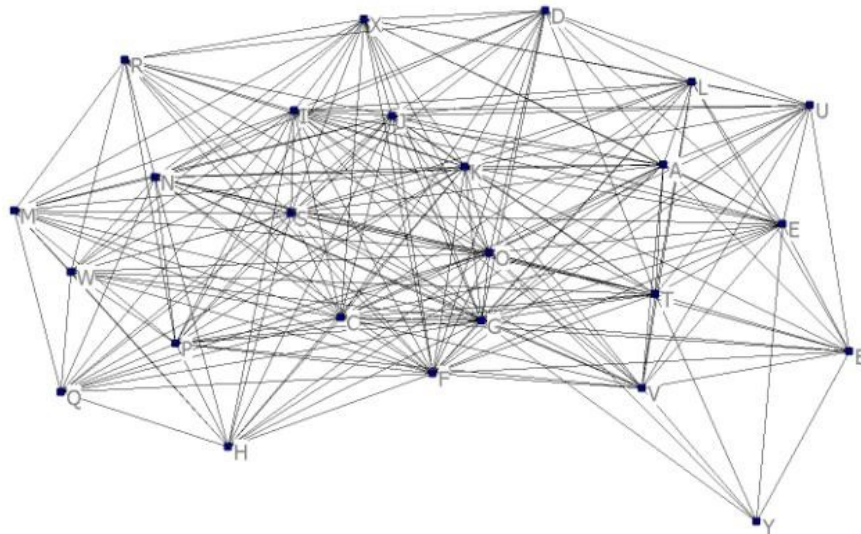
### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of the current study unveiled many opportunities for future research studies related to bibliotherapy, senior adults, and social connectedness. This study should be replicated using the model created in the current study that addresses socialization and creating connections using virtual bibliotherapy among senior adults. Future replication studies might include the use of bibliotherapy with different populations, age groups, and affinity groups.

The ability of Zoom and other technology tools to analyze social interaction presents an outstanding opportunity for researchers to examine the verbal interactions of group members. Social network analysis (SNA) tools can be used to determine the direction and number of connections during discussion. For example, after obtaining participants' permission, one could use Zoom recordings and SNA software to create a visual display of social interactions during a specific discussion, much like a sociogram. A typical example of an SNA interaction map is presented in Figure 1. Letters of the alphabet are used to point to specific individuals in the discussion group. Using the discussion map, the researcher can identify the people who interact most often and least often and measure the number of interactions between and among members.

## Figure 1

### *Social Network Analysis*



*Note:* The letters represent participants in the discussion group. The lines between letters indicate interactions between individuals. Adapted from “Social Network Analysis: A Tool to Improve Understanding of Collaboration Management Groups,” by A. Springer and J. Steiguer, 2011, *Journal of Extension*, 49(6), p. 5 ([https://archives.joe.org/joe/2011december/pdf/JOE\\_v49\\_6rb7.pdf](https://archives.joe.org/joe/2011december/pdf/JOE_v49_6rb7.pdf)). Copyright 2011 by Extension Journal.

In Gladwell’s (2000) book, *The Tipping Point*, the ways people interact are characterized in three distinctive ways: the maven, the connector, or the salesman. A maven influences others with information, a connector knows and influences a number of people, and the salesman influences others through the power of persuasion. This framework and others could be applied to virtual book study analyses of participant interactions and engagement.

Future studies of bibliotherapy could focus on the interactions and connections among group members based on different book genres or the timeline of the study. Additional elements

of the studies might include variations in the amount of time engaged in the study as well as the duration of the study in weeks.

Interaction analyses using SNA tools could be conducted to examine participants' interactions using a variety of book genres to determine the books that best encourage recruitment, engagement, and participant retention in the study. Similarly, a comparison study of participants' perceptions of knowledge gained and applications to daily life would serve to explore the most appealing or effective timelines for a book study and for encouraging connectedness, especially among different age groups and cultures.

Research on the experiences of book study facilitators should be a priority in order to gather data to improve connectedness between and among group members. To better understand facilitators' experiences during bibliotherapy, analyses of virtual studies may be undertaken to gather data regarding the ease or difficulty of facilitating engagement among participants.

Additional qualitative data could be examined based on participants' journals or creative writing after each weekly book session. Two prompts might be addressed each week: What did you learn? How can you apply what you learned to your life? Participant answers could be analyzed and distilled via cross-case comparisons.

Finally, a pretest-posttest study of loneliness, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or other mental health problems among children, adolescents, or adults should be undertaken to determine the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in reducing negative emotions and promoting positive emotions and perceptions of connectedness and well-being.

### **Limitations**

The current study involved the following limitations and delimitations. Using a virtual book study as an intervention required a certain level of confidence and comfort with technical



skills for each participant. A lack of computer skills or Internet access may have negatively influenced prospective participants' willingness to participate in the study or their perceptions regarding social connectedness during the study. The text chosen for the book study may have also influenced the level of social interaction that occurred during the book study intervention. The book study took place within a relatively short period of time; the four sessions over a period of 8-weeks and synchronous delivery method may have inhibited participants' ability to connect socially.

Delimitations of the study included the small sample size and the use of older adult subjects who were members of a church community. The virtual experiences of older adult participants may not be generalizable to the general population. However, a small sample size was appropriate for a book study in which participants shared their thoughts and feelings. Members of a church community may have been more open to connectedness than the average population. Finally, the small number of people in the study may not have been representative of the larger community of senior adults.

### **Significance**

Social distancing during COVID-19 produced many challenges and opportunities. Prior to COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, many older adults participated in gatherings at churches for social, emotional, and spiritual support. As a result of the lockdowns, many senior adults were unable to leave their homes. One way to meet the challenge of senior adults' need for connectedness was to offer a virtual book study. The current study was designed to explore the influence of bibliotherapy on senior adults' perceptions of social connectedness and to develop a model for virtual book studies.

Key points gleaned from the study resulted in the formation of a model designed to guide

future virtual book studies to encourage social connectedness. Based on participants' feedback, participants desired time for recreational conversation before and after each meeting, less reading each week, more book study sessions to cover the material, and Zoom training before and during the study. Choosing an engaging book was key for fostering connections to self, others, and the book. The virtual book study was important for older adults as it was a form of accountability and allowed senior participants to socially engage safely from their homes.

The results of the current study add to the body of research in two distinct areas: senior adults' connectedness and bibliotherapy to foster connectedness. The current study added to the body of bibliotherapy research. The results of the current study also add to the theories of social attachment and connectedness among adults (Ainsworth, 1965; Bowlby, 1958; Erikson, 1959/1994; Lieberman, 2003).

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## Appendix A

### Print and Email Announcement/Invitation to Participate in Book Study

Church Family,

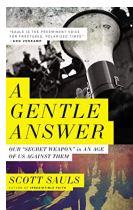
Please consider joining our book study beginning on September 9, 2021. The book study will be held from 7–8 pm on Thursdays, every other week, and you won't even need to leave your house! The book study will be conducted via Zoom, which is a mere click on a weblink to participate. So easy! You can do it! Please email Becky Fisher at [refisher1@seu.edu](mailto:refisher1@seu.edu) if you would like to join the book study. Elizabeth Collins will be leading the study.

Sincerely,

Becky Fisher

### A Gentle Answer: Our “Secret Weapon” in An Age of Us Against Them

Are you troubled by the polarized climate in which we live? Do you wonder how you can still make a difference as a Christian when the news carries constant messages of disagreements, discord, and discontent? What would Jesus do if he were alive during these turbulent times? Please join the virtual book study of *A Gentle Answer: Our “Secret Weapon” in an Age of Us Against Them*. We will turn to Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer turns away wrath,” with author Scott Sauls and learn about the secret weapon that awaits us. Please click on the image below for more information about the book.



## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe your overall experience in the book study?
2. Please describe a discussion that stands out in your memory.
3. In what ways did the book foster meaningful interactions during the book study?
4. How would you describe the sharing that occurred during the book study?
5. In what ways were your connections to the group members strengthened during the book study?
6. Please describe any differences that you noticed in the online book study versus a face-to-face book study.
7. Would you participate in another online book study?

## Appendix C

### Adult Consent Form

(to be administered by the researcher in paper format prior to interviews)

**PROJECT TITLE:** AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SENIOR ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF A VIRTUAL BOOK STUDY

**INVESTIGATORS:** Rebecca E. Fisher (MLS, Ed.D. candidate) Southeastern University, Dr. Patty LeBlanc, Professor of Education, Dr. Janet Deck, Professor of Education, Southeastern University

**PURPOSE:** This study will examine senior adults' perceptions of bibliotherapy (book studies) in a virtual format. The book study will take place weekly for 6 weeks for one hour each week. Volunteers will be interviewed following the study to determine the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the virtual format for the group book study.

The virtual book study meetings will meet via Zoom, and each study will be recorded (audio and video) for future research. The researcher will conduct interviews with participant volunteers after the book study ends. She will also complete an analysis of responses to interview questions. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at Southeastern University.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** The participant may experience benefits from involvement in the book study, such as strengthened social ties and new knowledge. The information gained may be used to create a virtual book study model for the church setting.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All interview data collected will be anonymized prior to analysis and reporting. Only the researcher and two Southeastern University faculty (dissertation committee members) will have access to the records. The anonymized data will be deleted five years after the completion of the study. Individual and group themes will be reported using pseudonyms in the dissertation; no identifying information will be used in the written results.

**CONTACT:** Becky Fisher [refisher1@seu.edu](mailto:refisher1@seu.edu) 321-536-1236; Dr. Patty LeBlanc, principal investigator [pbleblanc@seu.edu](mailto:pbleblanc@seu.edu); or Southeastern's Institutional Review Board at [irb@seu.edu](mailto:irb@seu.edu).

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty. I also understand that I can choose not to respond to any interview question without penalty.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:**

- I have been fully informed about the purposes of the interviews and the study’s procedures. I understand that none of my personal information will be identifiable in the written report of the study.
  
- I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.
  
- I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I hereby give permission to participate in the interview and have been informed that I may receive a copy of the research report.
  
- I understand that my interview will be audio-recorded and may be video-recorded if conducted in virtual format. Only the researcher and two members of the dissertation committee will have access to the recordings and the anonymized transcripts. The recordings will be strictly maintained in the researcher’s password-protected computer and deleted after five years.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of the Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date