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Literary Reading and Mental Wellbeing

Abstract: Literary reading and health has become an established field in the twenty-first century, impelled in part by the widespread phenomenon of reading groups in Europe and North America. Research has investigated the power of reading groups and shared reading to alleviate mental and physical health conditions (depression, dementia, chronic pain) by encouraging and enhancing mental processes, including: re-appraisal (of difficult experiences, attitudes towards self and others) and meta-cognition (the ability to think about one's own thought processes, including how to connect affective and cognitive responses and modify cognitive mode). The extent to which the complexity of literary texts (including stylistic and syntactic defamiliarization) helps mediate the observed and reported health benefits of shared reading is one strong current focus of research. Shared reading groups as a technology to enable emotionally sharing human communities is equally an important strand of exploration.

Published research crosses diverse disciplines – literature, linguistics, medicine, sociology, and psychology. It employs a wide breadth of procedures that range from: (a) established methods (e.g., psychological experimentation, standardized quantitative measures); (b) established qualitative methods (e.g., Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Ethnographic fieldwork); and (c) new quantitative tools for analyzing the phenomenology of reading and innovative qualitative methods (e.g., video-assisted interviews and micro-phenomenological interviews). These multi-disciplinary initiatives combine experiential approaches with physiological measures (e.g., real-time heart rate, galvanic skin response) to capture the underlying biological mechanisms involved in the dynamic cognition, affective/emotional reactions, and animated thought produced by reading.

Introduction

Literary reading and health has become an established field for empirical study in the twenty-first century. As a concept, the value of literature for health has a much longer history. The earliest authenticated library, founded by Pharaoh Rameses II in ancient Thebes, bore the inscription over its portals, “the house of healing for the soul” (Lutz, 1978). The revival of ancient and classical culture

in the Elizabethan age laid the foundation for future English poetry both as written craft and as a medium of health. For Renaissance poetics, verse contained passionate feeling and struggling, conflicted thoughts, in ways that alleviated or consoled human sorrow through aesthetic achievement. A poem, said Samuel Daniel, in *A Defence of Rhyme* (1603/1947), makes form out of the forces of human chaos through the creation of a little world, an “orb of order,” whose structured rhythmic patterns offer a mental safeguard, a rhymed holdfast, against disorder or entropy (Daniel, 1947, p. 69). George Puttenham, in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589/2007), drew a direct analogy between the poet and the physician, claiming that the poem, as a repository of intense private pain, offers, cathartically, “one short sorrowing” as “the remedy of a long and grievous sorrow” (Whigham & Rebhorn, 2007, p. 137). Such remedial uses of poetry resonate with Robert Burton’s project in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1601), which, as Mary Ann Lund notes, goes “beyond the normal scope of medical writing on disease, since it aims to perform a cure through its pages” (Lund, 2010, p. 2). “My lines,” wrote Burton, “shall not onely recreate, but rectifie the minde” (Faulkner et al., 1994, vol 3, p. 5).

In recent times, influential studies on the value of reading for psychological health have emphasised the effects of fiction in particular. Regular reading of fiction is associated with longevity (Bavishi et al., 2016), increased social interaction and social support (Mar et al., 2006), and improved social understanding (Oatley, 2016; Mar, 2018; Kidd & Castano, 2013, 2018). Those who read fiction show an improved capacity for empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Koopman, 2015), and the effect is more marked when the fiction is literary (Kidd & Castano 2013; Koopman, 2016, 2018; Pino & Mazza, 2016; Nunning, 2014; Hakemulder et al., 2017). Kidd and Castano’s (2013) experiments – in which effects on social understanding of reading literary fiction and popular genre fiction were compared – were challenged by subsequent replication efforts, which showed no difference in Theory of Mind performance between participants assigned to read literary fiction or popular genre fiction (Panero et al., 2016). However, Kidd and Castano’s (2018) own attempt to replicate their original experimental findings indicated that familiarity with literary fiction positively predicted Theory of Mind performance while familiarity with popular genre fiction did not. This relation could not be accounted for by differences in gender, age, undergraduate major, educational attainment, or self-reported trait empathy, suggesting that a robust relation between exposure to fiction and empathy may be primarily driven by literary fiction. Nonetheless, Mar cautions against the conclusion that fiction is “a magical panacea that can force the acquisition of social knowledge” and urges viewing fiction as “an opportunity to engage social processes by thinking about characters and an opportunity to learn about human nature. Not

everyone will be sufficiently motivated and capable of taking up this opportunity” (Mar, 2018, p. 465).

A series of related studies has shown the power of fiction-reading to change aspects of personality, including emotional and cognitive openness and thinking styles (Djikic et al., 2009a, 2009b, 2012, 2013). These effects are attributed to literary fiction’s “simulation” of the social world (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Zunshine, 2006). The reader is immersed in and required to navigate situations and characters that are complex, multiple, and ambiguous (Culpeper 2001; Schneider, 2001; Hakemulder 2000; Miesen, 2004). The reader’s ethical, emotional, and cognitive repertoire for understanding human experience is thereby expanded. Approaching the mental construction of fictional worlds and the related engagement with fictional characters from a cognitive neuroscientific perspective, Jacobs and Willems (2018) discuss the likely neuronal correlates of certain key processes in literary reading, including immersion, inference, and situation model building, as well as the methodological challenges of identifying the neuronal bases of fiction-processing. The authors conclude that, despite the limited available evidence from neuro-imaging of a link between fiction-reading and changes in neurological make up, recent neuro-cognitive studies provide correlational evidence that fiction-reading trains the mentalising network by engaging cognitive and affective empathy (Jacobs & Willems, 2018, pp. 161–162).

Over the last decade, empirical research on reading and health has been impelled by the widespread phenomenon of reading groups in Europe and North America, and particularly by the model of Shared Reading developed and delivered by the UK national charity *The Reader*. Shared Reading groups are distinct from the conventional book clubs that have enjoyed a revival in recent decades (Hartley, 2002). The material is not read in advance nor confined to contemporary works or a restricted (middle-class) demographic. Rather, *The Reader* is dedicated to extending literary reading to hard-to-reach communities and to people who are typically beginners or do not think of themselves as readers (Davis, 2010, 2011). The literature is not chosen for its targeted relevance as in self-help bibliotherapy (Hicks, 2006) or reading interventions that seek to treat particular cases, conditions, or moods (Berthoud & Elderkin, 2013; Bate & Ratcliff, 2016). Rather, poems, short stories, and novels – from the whole range of the literary heritage down the ages – are read aloud, together, live, and the reading is regularly interrupted for group members to share thoughts and responses.

Shared Reading thereby resurrects or continues two time-honoured Western traditions: (a) the practice of reading aloud – a lost or outmoded culture successively overtaken by print, televisual, and digital cultures (Wolf, 2008; Ong, 2012) and (b) a faith in the curative properties intrinsic to literature espoused by

classical and Renaissance thinkers. *The Reader's* work is most immediately inspired by two more recent literary revolutions. First, the poetic one is marked by “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1802) with its democratic ambitions for the uses of poetry in the common world – above all in Wordsworth’s “sorrow that is not sorrow.../ to hear of” (*The Prelude*, 1805; Wordsworth et al., 1979, p. 627). Second, the novelistic one arose out of the Industrial Revolution and the crisis of meaning involved in secularization (Macintyre, 1981). *The Reader's* Shared Reading model consciously builds on the literary ambitions of Victorian realism in its broad humanizing endeavor to represent real life – through the development of prose fiction as well as poetry – and by reaching *into* the real life of the reader, transformatively (Rose, 2010). In so doing, Shared Reading also connects with a socio-cultural tradition of family and community reading that became embedded and widespread in Victorian England (Bradley & John, 2015) but that has antecedents in practices of shared religious reading – in Christian middle-class families (Barnard, 1999) and orthodox Jewish communities (Wimpfheimer, 2018). It also has contemporary-historical parallels in the public readings in cigar-factories for Cuban workers in the 1860s (Manguel, 1997).

Currently there are 600 reading groups across the UK and in Europe, in health and social care contexts that include drug and rehabilitation centers, prisons, hospitals, drop-in centers in local medical practices, dementia care homes, facilities for looked-after children, and schools and libraries. This chapter focuses on the empirical research carried out in relation to some of these Shared Reading examples in the UK and in Denmark.

Published research in this area crosses diverse disciplines – literature, linguistics, medicine, sociology, and psychology. It also employs a wide breadth of approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, established and innovative. Often these complement, corroborate, or overlap with one another in multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional research and thinking. Thus, the sections that follow range across these approaches to demonstrate key findings, concepts, and theories currently emergent in the field. We begin, however, with the quantitative evidence and the standard measures of health and wellbeing that have proved valuable in this research, before devoting the remainder of the chapter to more wide-ranging and innovative empirical methods.

Shared Reading as an Alternative Mental Health Therapy: The “Measured” Evidence

Multiple published studies from the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS, University of Liverpool) have shown the value of Shared Reading in relation to specific mental health conditions using standard measures of psychological health. A mixed methods pilot study of Shared Reading for people diagnosed with depression, using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ 9) at baseline and post-intervention, showed a statistically significant alleviation of symptoms in participants who had attended the reading group over a twelve-month period (Dowrick et al., 2012). However, in the absence of a control group only the temporal association of Shared Reading with reduced depression could be noted – but not as a conclusive causal effect. A larger study of Shared Reading for dementia (involving 61 participants) used the Neuropsychiatric Inventory Questionnaire (NPI-Q), which measures ten behavioural areas – including delusions, agitation, depression, apathy, and irritability – at monthly intervals over a three- to six-month period. Results indicated that mean symptom scores were lower throughout the reading period than at baseline (Billington et al., 2013). A second study used a wait-list design: 31 participants were randomly assigned to either reading-waiting groups (three months of reading, followed by three months of not reading) or waiting-reading groups (three months of not reading, followed by three months of reading). Quality of life was assessed via the DEMQOL Proxy, an interviewer-administered carer-rated measure that evaluates various aspects of mood (e.g., contentment, energy levels, cheerfulness), memory difficulties, and participation levels in everyday activities. Compared to the waiting condition, the positive effects of Shared Reading on quality of life were demonstrated at the commencement of the reading groups and were maintained once the activity ended (Longden et al., 2016). A pilot Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) arising out of these initial studies, which was carried out in New Zealand, replicated these results in respect of quality of life and depression (using Resident Quality of Life in Alzheimer’s Disease [QoL-AD] and the Geriatric Depression Scale Short Form [GDS-SF]), as well as finding improvements in cognition, mentalization, and wellbeing (via Adenbrooke’s-III Cognitive Assessment, Thriving of Older Persons Assessment Scale and the FACES Test of Theory of Mind) (Orrell et al., 2019). (A full RCT – in Australia and the UK as well as in New Zealand – is currently underway.)

In a further UK study of Shared Reading – in this case, for chronic pain sufferers – participants kept twice-daily (12-hourly) pain and emotion diaries as a measure of physical/psychological changes over a period of six months while

attending a Shared Reading group at their regular clinic. Pain severity was recorded using a 0–10 rating scale (0=nonexistent, 10=severe), at 12-hour intervals. At the same time, participants wrote down two words to describe their feelings, using as a guide (although not restricted to) those listed on the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (see below). Results, albeit from a small pilot sample, indicated improvements in mood and pain for up to two days following the Shared Reading session, findings that were not replicated in relation to the comparator activity, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Billington et al., 2016a).

Of the study designs represented above – (a) pre/post intervention measures (Dowrick et al., 2012); (b) waiting list designs (in which participants are effectively their own controls) (Longden et al., 2016); and (c) comparator intervention/activity (Billington et al., 2016a) – the latter has proved most valuable for teasing out the specific outcomes produced by Shared Reading in relation to psychological health and wellbeing. In a study of Shared Reading in relation to community mental health, Longden et al. (2015) divided participants into two groups, A and B. In a cross-over design, Group A experienced six Shared Reading sessions, followed by six Built Environment Design Workshops (developing designs for a Shared Reading hub); simultaneously Group B experienced six Built Environment sessions followed by six Shared Reading sessions, with the same literary texts and design activities used in both groups. The primary outcome measure was the Ryff Scales of Psychological Wellbeing, which is built around six theoretically constructed dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, (positive) relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). Even short involvement in Shared Reading produced statistically significant beneficial outcomes in terms of improving an individual's sense of purpose in life and increased belief in having meaningful life-goals, while, in the built environment groups, the same participants scored highly on the subscale measuring personal growth. Such findings are important in discriminating the particular and intrinsic benefits of Shared Reading, as well as in identifying measurement instruments that are sufficiently nuanced and sensitive to capture the specific aspects of psychological wellbeing encouraged by Shared Reading. Although these results were not replicated in a follow-up study by Steenberg et al. in relation to an equivalent (community mental health) population (see Billington et al., 2019a), this was partly because an inactive control was used, rather than a crossover design, but it might also be due to the fact that a shorter version of the Ryff Scales was used (Ryff & Keys, 1995). Construct validity remains an issue in the literature as different versions of the scales demonstrate differences in validity (see Espinoza et al., 2018, for a review and suggested bi-factor model analysis). The Ryff currently remains, however, the measurement tool of choice for psychological health in Shared Reading re-

search, not least because the Ryff scales have potential for measuring observed aspects of the reading *process* (such as an enhanced sense of meaningfulness – a recurrent qualitative finding as this chapter will show) as well as reading *outcomes*. Assessment batteries in relation to reading (particularly in bibliotherapy studies) are usually chosen on the basis of a hypothesized and desired outcome (e. g., weight loss, enhanced self-esteem) without reference to mechanisms of change (Lenkowsky, 1987). The aim and ambition in mixed methods studies of Shared Reading is, by contrast, to close the gap between the inductive bottom-up findings from observation and top-down driven hypothesis-testing deductive designs (Billington et al., 2019a).

One further valuable tool in this endeavor has proved to be the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), which measures participants' affective state immediately following experience of Shared Reading and control activities (Watson et al., 1988). Consisting of words describing emotions (10 positive, 10 negative), the scale asks participants to write next to each word the extent to which they are feeling each emotion on a scale of 1–5 (1 = not at all; 5 = extremely). In addition, participants in two studies (Longden et al., 2015; Billington et al., 2016a) were asked to write down two words or phrases that best described their experience on each occasion. Across the two studies, there was a consistent and statistically significant tendency for involvement in Shared Reading to be associated with self-report of more positive than negative affect, with a tendency for slightly lower negative scores – as well as slightly higher positive scores – in relation to Shared Reading as compared with the control activity/intervention. This occurred without the lower negative scores impacting on overall improvement in psychological wellbeing (as captured by the Ryff scales). There was also a greater range and intensity of expressed feeling, good and bad, in the two words or phrases that participants recorded after each Shared Reading session. This is consistent with the qualitative findings discussed below of a far greater diversity of elicited emotion in Shared Reading as compared to the comparator therapeutic intervention (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and an expanded vocabulary for emotional expression.

Experience-near Qualitative Methods

A range of established qualitative methods has been successfully used in research on Shared Reading. There has been particular emphasis on experience-near (i. e. phenomenological and ethnographic) approaches. These methods have proved especially valuable, not least because they emphasize the lived experience of the *individual*. As the body of research on Shared Reading shows, a

story or poem is always a unique event for each reader even when the literature is shared aloud within a group (Hoggart, 2001, p. 199). As a consequence, the processes of “meaning-making” set in train by literary reading – processes that the research represented here suggests is a crucial aspect of literature’s health-giving properties – are highly subjective. Thus they require the kind of fine-grained interpretative analysis that seeks to shed light on the underlying cognitive and affective processes through close attention to participant perceptions of their experience (e. g., Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2008). IPA involves detailed analysis on a case-by-case basis (Smith, 2011). Data are collected via (a small sample of) individual semi-structured interviews and transcripts analyzed in an iterative process, from initial coding through increasing levels of abstraction to the identification and organization of themes (“from rich description to conceptual interpretation”; Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 187). Although IPA is systematic, it boasts a “healthy flexibility” (Smith et al. 2009, p. 79), such that, at each stage – in the identification of emerging themes within individual accounts as well as in analysis of their interconnection across accounts and the description of superordinate themes – the analysis is guided by the individual account.

One key innovative technique from which many of the findings below emerge is a multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary one developed by CRILS. Over the past decade, in all its funded research studies, CRILS has sought to capture and investigate the processes of Shared Reading by filming, sound-recording, and transcribing group sessions (with informed consent from all participants). The recordings have been analysed, using a grounded theory framework, by an interdisciplinary research team (comprised of literature specialists, health professionals, and academic psychologists) to establish significant phenomena (Billington et al., 2019b). Concurrently, transcripts of the video-recorded material were independently analysed by linguists, using the complementary approaches of (a) quantitative corpus analysis (to identify lexical and grammatical expressions that were statistically significant) and (b) qualitative conversation analysis (relating the expressions identified via corpus analysis to their context and examining how the texts being read helped to shape conversational contributions) (Lampropoulou et al., 2019). Finally, in a further methodological innovation, selections from the video-recordings were shown to group participants in individual interviews. Reviewing highlights of their own participation, participants were able to re-inhabit the feel of significant but small passing moments, rather than merely recalling them after the event in overly generalized terms (Billington et al., 2019b).

In what follows we present key concepts emerging from the innovative research methods described above as well as from recent ethnographic, phenom-

enological, and linguistic studies. We show how these findings challenge some established psychological theory in the field of reading and health. Although the emphasis is on Shared Reading, this work has implications for literary reading in general. While no one can access fully the inner processes of silent solitary reading, still, within the admittedly different context of these small intimate groups reading aloud together, this combination of qualitative approaches and quantitative measures provides rare empirical insights into private processes of reading. It offers a window into what is usually hidden within solo literary reading but is here made spontaneously manifest.

Where appropriate, therefore, in what follows, we point to potential alignments between our findings and those of research on individual readers of literature. Indeed, the concentration and emphasis on the effects of Shared Reading upon individual readers, suggests that any hard and fast distinction between the experience of reading literature within the group context of Shared Reading and the experience of reading privately may not be appropriate. Nonetheless we are especially mindful in the ensuing sections that the experimental conditions under which Shared Reading and individual reading are tested are markedly different, and, while the two sets of findings are often mutually supportive, some caution needs to be exercised at this stage in identifying one set with another too readily.

Embodied Reading

In participant testimony from a range of studies, Shared Reading is frequently described as producing an involuntary emotional and neo-physical connection to the literary work, which, anterior to the level of considered response, is often the first point of entry: “When you’re reading a well-written, powerful poem, it sort of hits you in the face even though it physically can’t”; “The reading can get to feelings very quickly: it’s almost condensed”; “You can feel it deep inside”; “The poem really zeroed in on my feelings, laid them bare”; “It has really – hit me; right there [points to heart], the whole poem” (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 287). Participants attest that this is the power, in the first place, of the poetry being read aloud by a facilitator who is trained in expressive reading. The book or poem exists live and performatively in the room as an emotional-vocal presence: “read aloud, things become more 3D and more alive...[c]ertain words, sort of like jump out at you”; “it seems to resonate”; “it got into me” (Billington et al., 2016a, p. 163). Where video-assisted interviews took place as part of the study, feelings first experienced by participants in the group were often powerfully re-experienced when they viewed the video clips. One partici-

pant, witnessing on film her first response to John Clare's poem *I Am*, said; "It's particular words I remember, something about turmoil and being tossed on the sea of nothingness. I feel it now actually, watching it again. It wasn't in the past, it was going on at the time, still is really" (Billington et al., 2019b, p. 209); "Right now," said another participant at interview, re-living his response to the "outcast" speaker in Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, "when I see these things in print, they strike home" (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 288). Readers frequently report how "print strikes home" as though the reader is caught pre-cognitively: "The poem kind of short-cut into a feeling when I was least expecting it. It just happened quite – suddenly"; "The poem just touched something in me" (Billington et al., 2019b, pp. 194, 208). Such testimony verified the evidence from the video-recordings in such studies that the literary material was putting the readers in touch with resonant areas of deep human experience otherwise difficult to locate or recover. Shared Reading thus provides naturalistic empirical evidence for the phenomenon of "being moved" in response to reading literary texts that has been systematically measured in recent experiments on aesthetic emotion (Menninghaus et al., 2019).

"A particular effort is necessary," says Claire Petitmengin, in describing her phenomenological interview technique for eliciting hidden subjective processes, "for a person to gain access to experience which lies underneath his or her representations, beliefs, judgements and comments" (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 235). The evidence from Shared Reading studies that have captured live reading is that literary reading can help trigger access to subterranean experience with quick involuntariness, "short-cutting" effort (Billington et al., 2019b, p. 208). As one participant put it: "sometimes there are things that you think about and you can't put it together, and then like the poem come and it fulfil, it fulfil that you don't remember, that you're puzzling about. Something is missing and then it fills in that space" (Davis et al., 2016, p. 39). There is further systematic research to be carried out on the extensive available data from the video-recordings and transcripts to determine the degree to which the triggered responses occurring in the naturalistic setting of Shared Reading align with findings from empirical studies involving numerical measurement, in which strikingness consistently marks readers' responses to stylistically foregrounded passages (van Peer, 1986; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Sopčák, 2007) or where extended metaphoric structures evoke self-reported "inexpressible realizations" (Kuiken & Douglas, 2018). Our qualitative finding is that texts involuntarily "land" on individual readers as if summoned by an inner missing "something." It is a happening poised between text and reader, in ways that resonate closely with Kuiken's theory of how deeply engaged literary reading elicits unspoken feeling ("inexpressible realisation") and responsive listening to the implicit

meanings of these evocative intimations (Kuiken, 2019). As a poem or a story goes on, at a specific instant something latent inside, at the back of the mind – it could be a thought, a memory, or another work of literature – is suddenly activated and aligned with it, silently, implicitly. The reader is still the reader – audience and witness to the text, which exists outside but, at the same time, “the mind is the realizer of its own sudden inner message” (Billington, 2016, p. 125). Although, the two research traditions represented here have developed separately and have not been systematically aligned, there is strong evidence to suggest that the expressive paradigm and findings emerging in respect of Shared Reading are concerned with the same subjective phenomenon.

It is because such a close relationship exists between the kind of reading experiences that Shared Reading facilitates and the aims of the micro-phenomenological interview developed by Petitmengin, that the latter has proved a particularly appropriate method for studying the therapeutic processes involved in this particular form of engaged reading. Designed for the purposes of becoming aware of, and being able to provide minute accounts of, pre-reflexive dimensions of subjective experience, the micro-phenomenological interview is a reiterative process in which the aim is to enhance insight into the “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1997, pp. 77–74, 91; 2004) of an experience. The method consists of a questioning technique in which the interviewer (as if in lieu of the “live” film clip used in the video-assisted interview) brings the interviewee back to “re-live” the experience.

Key to the micro-phenomenological interview is [helping] the subject to re-enact or evoke the experience, by retrieving the precise spatio-temporal context, including the visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic, and (possibly) olfactory sensations associated with the experience to be described. The subject evokes this moment when she recalls it to the point that the past situation becomes more vivid for her than the present situation is. (Petitmengin et al., 2019, pp. 694–695)

It is worth noting that the film clips used in video-assisted interviews in respect of qualitative research on Shared Reading (see above) largely replace – or act as a primary tool in assisting – the interviewer in this process, with the potential considerably to accelerate and authenticate this process of re-enactment or evocation via live recall. The latter likewise *re-presents* specific significant instants of reading such that the latter are reviewed, re-experienced, and reflected upon by the subject within their original temporal unfolding. The video-assisted interview is potentially a close ally in the efforts of the micro-phenomenological interview to capture – in contradistinction to standard qualitative methods (including IPA, see above) that emphasise thematic analysis without procedures to identify temporal dynamics – the subjective processes underlying a specific mo-

ment in time (synchronic dimension) together with the micro-acts that trigger and accompany this evolution over time (diachronic analysis) (Petitmengin et al., 2019, p. 701).

“Embodied identification” is emerging, via the micro-phenomenological interview method, as a strong component of the shared reading process. For example, in a recent study by Steenberg, a reader is interviewed about her report of a “strong” experience in relation to Thomas Tranströmer’s poem *Romanesque Arches*, and recounts: “I feel I come to some other place emotionally in my mind,” “a blackout,” a feeling of being “no longer myself.” Repeatedly brought back to the dimension of the blackout, the participant said the poet “writes me into his confusion, I also feel I have that feeling. I don’t experience it from the outside, I am part it” (Billington, 2019b, p. 205). The participant went on to explain that as the poet had lost consciousness, so had she. Such instances of embodied identification with the perspective of the poem counter central guiding precepts of certain forms of reading therapy. Bibliotherapy, for example, as it was first theorized by Schrodes (1955), is based on identification, a hypothesis constantly repeated in the literature (Lenkowsky, 1987; Katz & Watt, 1992; Silverberg, 2003), and founded on the hypothesis that the therapeutic outcome is driven by a thematic-oriented cognitive insight into a previously defined “problem” (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). Embodied identification, however, as the qualitative evidence offered above attests, can happen without being a “theme” or a problem driven by a “theme.” Rather, it seems to be driven by a more fundamental, primary, and kinesthetic mechanism, a finding that is supported by experimental research on “absorption” in solitary reading (Hakemulder, et al., 2017). Always taking into account the importance of attending to the social-pragmatic and interpersonal as well as psychological-cognitive dimensions of literary reading (Vipond & Hunt, 1984), the findings of this study support ongoing research on “absorption” and “immersion” and offer a way into studying the role of embodied identification as it happens spontaneously in live-reading settings outside of the laboratory.

Research to date is sufficient to enable future hypothesis-driven mixed method designs in relation to therapeutic processes enabled by Shared Reading. What is becoming clear also is that the methods utilized in generating these findings – the video-assisted and the micro-phenomenological interview – are, arguably, themselves therapeutic, insofar as they help to extend or consolidate the beneficial experiences of Shared Reading. Not only do these techniques mirror the mode of reading that facilitators aim for (as discussed below) in Shared Reading – i. e. thick descriptive explorations of what something “feels like”; these interview styles also gave opportunity for participants newly to value themselves and their experience. “It’s a kind of reminder that there is a self in

there.” “It makes you feel like a fully-functioning person again. I like what I’m seeing more than probably I ever have” (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 296). As Davis & Billington (2020) point out, in the context of often difficult lives, these moments of achievement, though transient and intricate, merit such recognition, not least by the participants themselves. The interviews, by making room for further self-reflection, also help consolidate some of the insights momentarily arising in the reading-group sessions, keeping the literature present and deepening the person’s relation to it (Billington et al., 2019b).

“Live” Thinking

Longden et al. (2015), Davis et al. (2016), Davis & Billington (2020) and Billington et al. (2019b) found that arousal and surprise in relation to the literature created the ground for affective responses and thinking that happened live and in the moment. This “liveness” was especially evident in a shift away from default responses or automatic language. A much-repeated locution noted by linguistic analysis, and unconsciously adopted by participants of different social background and educational experience, is the phrase “it is as though” or “it’s almost as if” or “it is almost like” or “I feel as though.” It is commonly the prelude or bridge to a bold and interesting breakthrough in thought (as opposed to the tonal opinionatedness of, say, “I just/still think”). Take these responses, again to John Clare’s *I Am* (a favourite in Shared Reading): “something about peace isn’t there”; “it’s almost like he wants freedom from mental turmoil or something like that”; “it’s almost as if the everyday life is paradise to him, as if the people every day are untouched by illness, grief, happiness” (Lampropoulou et al., 2019, p. 243). Arising out of an uncertainty or hesitation that is nonetheless far from disabling, “almost as if,” “something like” are tools that allow time, space, and permission for what is tentative or provisional, on the borderline between language and thought, in the form of imaginative interpretation and inference, close to the intrinsic spirit of literary thinking itself (Davis & Billington, 2020).

Of key importance, too, these studies found, were pauses or stops or unfinished sentences. In response to George Eliot’s novella, *Silas Marner*, where the protagonist, having lost all his money, adopts the habit of opening his door and looking out in the hope his money might come back to him, one reader said: “Suddenly your life’s different, it’s wondering what – it’s a future that you don’t know. In the past the future’s always been – there” (Lampropoulou et al., 2019b, p. 244). The effect of such uncompleted, non-naming locutions is more of a full silence than an empty one. An emergent live thought seems not so

much blocked as to exist suggestively and unspoken in the resonant atmosphere of the group without a ready-made category or framework. Sometimes these “stops” or “hangings” appear symptomatic of the realization or re-creation of what has powerfully stopped lives in the past, or hesitancy and uncertainty in relation to the future. Reading the final lines of Matthew Arnold’s *The Buried Life* (“And then he thinks he knows/The hills where his life rose,/And the sea where it goes”), one participant said: “Yes, it seems to be quite a distance between the person you once were – hoping to be, and the person you have become” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 39). The stop here is to do with the difficulty experienced by a person who in the present looks back to the past, but a past that seems now to have lost the future it once had – hence the lack of an immediately articulable future now. These complicated time loops, affecting the imagined understanding of time itself (compare Linda’s “In the past, the future’s always been – there”), are experienced in the linguistic hesitations that researchers have called “creative inarticulacy” (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 290). At such moments, the challenging depth of the literature blocks simple facility and literalistic opinion, galvanizing a new kind of probing, exploratory language that is often spontaneously creative (Billington et al., 2019b). Once again, the data and findings in relation to Shared Reading offer corroboration, in the naturalistic setting of a reading group, of findings emerging under more experimental (empirical and neuroscientific) conditions: that slowed reading times and heightened attentional focus occur in response to syntactically foregrounded literary passages (Kuiken & Miall, 1994; Bruhn, 2018) and that the complexity of literary language has potential to galvanise existing brain pathways (Thierry et al., 2008; Keidel et al., 2012). These pioneering scientific studies, in turn, add weight to the evidence emerging from CRILS’ mixed methods protocol.

Davis et al. (2016) found instances, for example, of group-members sensing an “intangible” reality in the face of which conventional language appears powerless or floundering. Hesitancy or groping – “something...kind of...sort of... like” – is then an effort to grasp this new reality. In addition to giving the speaker that little extra time she needs to fill the gap, however roughly, these hesitation strategies suggest “the speaker’s lack of familiarity with the entity being described, or a degree of surprise” at the atypicality (Goatly, 2011, p. 191). Sometimes participants in Shared Reading reach for metaphor or conceit in a process of sought-tangibility equivalent to the creation of poetry itself. “It splits up the darkness” said one reader in response to Robert Hayden’s poem, *Those Winter Sundays* (in which a father’s un-thanked love is lovingly remembered) (Davis et al., 2016, p. 25). Often the new language is visibly inflected by the language of the poem or story. So, for example, when a group of people living with chronic pain and associated depression were reading Laurie Rieker’s *Mysteriously Stand-*

ing, which describes “intervals of withdrawal where I am a burned field... little Stonehenge of the heart,” one reader asks, “that someone describing how something that you don’t think has feelings might feel?” (Billington et al., 2019b, p. 197). The poem’s effort to make “something” that is not there, *there*, substantial, summons a vocabulary other than labelling, which here has an impact upon syntax. Such formulations occur in contrast to the norms of pre-programming or the speech patterns of familiarised automaticity that can characterise ill health (Nezhad et al., 2017; Tesio et al., 2018).

The linguistic clue that these phenomena occurred in live relation to the text is deixis (cues and phrases, that require contextual information to convey any meaning – personal pronouns for example). In discussing the text, readers characteristically maintained the text’s original deixis for identification of person, time, and space, rather than shifting it to signal the perspective of the reading group, indicating a strong degree of involvement between participants in the group and the protagonists in the text (Longden et al., 2015; Billington et al., 2016a). As a result, the text was not detached but transferred to the here and now of the reading group interaction. Of note, too, was the characteristic use of the present tense in discussion, so that even past life was not distant (Lampropoulou et al., 2019). Deixis also sometimes signified an initial pointing activity, an act of instinctive silent location ahead of the ability for further articulation. For example: “I’ve been *there*” was one participant’s shorthand way of explaining, amid pain, his need to leave the room during a reading of John Clare’s *I Am* on mental breakdown (Lampropoulou et al., 2019, pp. 242–243); “That bit *there*” was one reader’s way of identifying the key moment of uplift “From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven’s gate” in Shakespeare’s sonnet 29 (Davis & Billington, 2016, p. 403). Reading, at such moments is a form of immediate doing, actively and dynamically in the moment. Its power to elicit “present-ness” is especially marked in people living with dementia, where the sudden liveness can also be a gift for carers whose loved ones might have become passive, inactive, or mentally and emotionally remote (Billington et al., 2013; Clarke et al., 2019).

Enhanced Mental Processes/Articulate Contemplation

Above all, the evidence from a range of studies of Shared Reading is that literature has potential at once to “hit” inner trouble *and* help unfold it into articulate expression. Where formal therapeutic interventions tend to impose (or medicalize explanation to circumvent) a vocabulary of feeling, in Shared Reading an expanded and personally meaningful language of emotion is felt or realized

via the text (Billington et al., 2016a; Lampropoulou et al., 2019). This phenomenon is often most startling when a person re-reads words from the literary text – as with the participant who involuntarily repeated (and recalled) the lines from John Clare’s poem (“tost/Into the nothingness.../Into the living sea”) (Robinson, 2008, p. 361; Billington et al., 2019b, p. 209). She is not so much “quoting” from the poem as inhabiting its emotional reality, which itself comes alive again in her. The literature at such times helps to provide a language for verbalized recognition, in place of passive suffering in areas of painful experience otherwise difficult to locate or speak of without reduction of meaning (Billington, 2016, Billington et al., 2016a; Billington & Davis, 2020). To give a further representative example: in a group for older adults, after a second reading of Edward Thomas’s poem *Adelstrop*, and after a long silence, one participant began to speak, musingly, only in the words of the poem, “‘No one left and no one came’.” Then she said: “That’s how it is for me. I don’t know if there is anyone there. I put words out but I don’t know if there is anyone really there to pick them up. One can’t be sure. One hopes. ‘No one left and no one came.’ No, it seems I am quite alone, but I trust there is someone there to receive it” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 39). In these instances, the literature seems to offer a vocalised place for something not fully known or named or not even had (“It seems...I trust”) to be momentarily held and realized (Billington et al., 2019b). (After another silence, as if in witness of that trust, the participant read the poem’s final stanza – “And for that minute a blackbird sang/Close by” (Hollis, p. 36) – saying, “I hear birds outside sometimes early in the morning. That’s a good sound” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 39).

These studies show Shared Reading offering an alternative discourse to (sometimes clichéd or stereotypical) modern forms of expression, enabling a move away from safe or habitual models for personal thinking (Davis, 2013; Billington, 2016). The relative difficulty of the literary language works as a profitable hindrance to default or automatic speech – accessing areas of experience for which the reader has no ready language yet which they need to work at and express or “get out” (Billington, 2019b, p. 200). It is in this sense that literature helps overcome what Petitmengin regards as an essential obstacle to establishing a relationship of “contact” with our own inward experience – the difficulty of putting our inner experience into words: “The vocabulary at our disposal to describe the various dimensions of our subjective experience is very poor, and this poverty can probably be put down to the fact that in our culture it has been little explored...We have no precise words to describe...the subtle internal processes” (Petitmengin, 2006, pp. 238–239). Literature is the one area of our inherited culture that does seriously explore the inner life (Billington, 2016a; Billington et al., 2019b). Our customarily impoverished language for first-person data –

the fact that the underlying raw-ness is hard to get down to – might be why people in difficulty need poetry’s and fiction’s dedication to articulate recognition of subjective experience (Billington et al., 2019b). It is in this sense that literary reading might be regarded as analogous to the aims and processes of psychotherapy in alleviating mental pain and psychic suffering. “Failure to be able to translate one’s emotional experience into thoughts,” says Wilfred Bion, is as disastrous for mental health as the “failure to eat, drink or breathe properly”; it is “a disaster in the development of the personality” (Bion, 1962, p. 56; Billington, 2016).

Thinking one’s thoughts and emotions, often called “mentalization,” has been found to take a particular form in Shared Reading, often involving significant reappraisal of past experience. For example, Robert Frost’s famous poem *The Road Not Taken*, most especially the lines where the two potential “roads” and selves diverge “and I – /I took the one less travelled by” (Lathem, 1988, p. 105) – brought back to one participant the experience of hospitalization over seven years with anorexia, while her twin sister was taking the more conventional path of university: “It’s almost like I can see what I *could* have done in this other person” (Billington et al., 2019b, p. 195). Witnessing her energised response to the poem on video, the participant said:

When the poem touches on something personal in your life or your experience, it doesn’t necessarily make you think about it in a new way – it makes you realize what your opinions are on it, that you hadn’t necessarily consciously thought about before. It makes you think about things on a level you can actually see. (Billington et al., 2019b, p. 200)

Characteristic here is the language of “realization” and the amalgam of old, long-felt content and a sudden new perspective, which the poem tacitly calls for (Longden et al., 2015). Both Billington et al., 2016a (studying reading for chronic pain) and Gray et al., 2016 (concerned with community mental health service users) found Shared Reading offered a “gateway” for re-discovering important aspects of self and connecting with pre-illness “normality,” providing a bridge to a former healthy self. These findings were replicated in a study of reading in prisons in which there were repeated instances of the literature spontaneously eliciting specific and vivid autobiographical memory or moments of recognition (Billington et al., 2016b) – sometimes demonstrably progressive in view of research evidence for memory impairment during periods of depression (Lemogne et al., 2006) and low self-esteem (Williams & Scott, 1988). Given that depressed people find it difficult to imagine present or future alternatives, since they are less able to retrieve specific episodes from the past that support them in a “better” view of themselves, literature’s power to restore a connected sense

of life and identity and recover the meaning and value of personal memory has potential, these studies suggest, to help build resilience against future breakdown. This is an area ripe for future research.

Significantly, across these same studies, literature also elicited difficult memories (“it reminds me of a very dark period of my life, that’s kind of returning, something that I’ve been hiding from myself all this time” [Gray et al., 2016, p. 258]), reclaiming “lost” parts of self previously concealed or too painful to articulate (Billington et al., 2016a; Longden et al., 2015). The power of the literature to elicit undiscovered or under-explored aspects of self while also enabling “fresh” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 162) or “flexible” (Billington et al., 2016a, p. 161) or “alternative” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 116) perspectives in relation to past or negative experience is a recurrent finding. This phenomenon resonates strongly with objectively measured engagement with literary texts in which experiencing of the text is “more than mere sentience or passing awareness; rather it is the process of becoming fully and reflectively present during a self- and object-reconstituting departure from everyday thinking” (Kuiken et al., 2012, p. 248) and where responsive engaged thinking is enlivened by the epistemic tensions created in extended metaphoric structures (Kuiken & Douglas, 2017, 2018, p. 47). While it is not possible to reproduce these experiments (carried out with solitary readers under test conditions) in the naturalistic setting of Shared Reading, the potential (in future research) for ascertaining the extent to which refreshed thinking in the context of Shared Reading corresponds to the meaningful engagement traced in empirical studies of solo reading is offered by the extensive transcribed data.

As well as offering a “testing ground for new ways of being” (Gray et al., 2016, p. 254), and enabling “practising understanding from a range of imagined positions and viewpoints” thereby “galvanising a new mentality” (Billington et al., 2016b, pp. 239–240), the literature made it possible to confront uncomfortable areas of experience or the “big issues” in a non-directive non-goal oriented way. A staff member in a study of shared reading in a women’s prison, for example, noted how the emotional engagement with human situations in fiction encouraged the women to discuss scenarios of action and reaction, and to internalise possibilities of alternative patterns of behavior in ways that the institution could deal with only as matters for therapeutic or disciplinary intervention (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 163). In her Cognitive Stylistic approach (using Text World Theory) to the personal and social impact of shared reading in a female prison, Canning (2017) likewise found that participants felt more able to reach new productive understandings – by using the fictional text-world bi-directionally to help make sense of their own and others’ experiences – than was possible in the goal-oriented “spotlight” (Canning, 2017, p. 184) of the therapist-pa-

tient exchange. Significantly, this is also the view of therapeutic practitioners themselves where they have embedded shared reading in their “treatment” provision. As a forensic psychiatrist running a shared reading group in the ward of a high-secure hospital puts it, the book replaces him as the “expert” (Billington et al., 2014, p. 28). Because reading is “not obviously therapy, it hasn’t been sanitised or processed as an evidence-based programme”, it elicits more of “the real person” (Billington, 2012, p. 69). In a related way, consultants described a chronic pain group as realising many of the aims that they sought via formal therapy. “Some of the things we’re trying to achieve in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) come out in an emotionally realized way in Shared Reading...The literature can bring things back or make them more individually ‘have-able’” (Jones & Ledsom, 2019, p. 439). Because Shared Reading does not choose works to target particular conditions, it also avoids the pitfalls of the current practice of textually mediated CBT – or the use of self-help books – “where assumptions are frequently made (and not tested) about what texts to use” (Troscianko, 2018, p. 205).

This flexibility of thinking that crosses from the self to the text and back again, and extends imaginatively to a range of perspectives within the text, has been found to be reflected linguistically in reading-group participants’ mobile use of pronouns – from “I” to “he” or “she,” or “we” (Davis & Billington, 2020) – and, most significantly, in a particular usage of “you” as a third-person informal version of “one” (Longden et al., 2015). This signals a mobile change of perspective, marking a transition from the protagonist’s mental state to the speaker’s own (“Sometimes there are things that you think about and you can’t put it together”) or from the specificity of a personal “I” to wider inclusiveness (“It seems to be far removed from the reality I am in now...It seems to be quite a distance between the person you once were – hoping to be, the person you have become”) (Lampropoulou et al., 2019). This mobile use of “you” (see also Sikora et al., 2011) is an instinctive instrument of thought, offering an imaginative middle ground for thoughtful exploration between the text and self (Fludernik, 1994; de Hoop & Hogeweg, 2014), and, as indicated further below, between self and others (in the text or in the group). These micro-linguistic traces suggest that something more dynamic is happening in reader engagement with literature within a shared reading context than emotional “identification.” What happens inside the imaginative immersion of the [Shared Reading] readers is demonstrably much quicker and far less consciously voluntary than the vicarious “sharing” of a fictional character’s emotions. There is no time for reflection. There is, strictly speaking, no thought, or no clear and complete one. What happens instead is “an almost impossible, vertiginous simultaneity” (Billington, 2016a, p. 125).

Literature's language-within-language is formal and sophisticated. But what it triggers in the reader is almost its asymmetrical opposite: a colloquial inner voice, a second language that is informally more crude, more like the immediate physical emotion of a shorthand, a coded message electrifyingly de-coded (Davis, 2013, p. 35).

Emotional and Existential Groupness

Across all studies represented here, the phenomenon of Shared Reading as catalysing the sense of a safe space for shared emotional meditation (rather than for conventionally or vulnerably exposing confession) is abundantly documented (Dowrick et al., 2012; Longden et al., 2015; Billington et al., 2016a). This safe space is variously described as a “separate protected” domain “qualitatively distinct from the outside world” (Gray et al., 2016, p. 252) and as a “bubble” or “invisible shield” protecting from feelings of self-consciousness (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 161) as well as from expectations of disclosure (Gray et al., 2016). With the literary text as its grounding center (Longden et al., 2015), each group creates its own (informal and unspoken) rules of engagement within semi-structured boundaries (Gray et al., 2016), allowing spontaneous connections to be made between different individuals at different moments in relation to different texts (Davis & Billington, 2020). As with the responses to Robert Frost or John Clare, one person, and then another, can become the “realizer” of the text or of a personal meaning, shifting the group “center” or creating a new alignment (Billington et al., 2019b). The natural and unpredictable nature of discussion is often explicitly contrasted by participants with their experience of reading in educational contexts, on the one hand, and with prescriptive group therapy, on the other: “No-one is dominating. It’s a bit like an opera. The parts will all be singing at the same time, and you have a baritone solo over there and the tenor will come in and they are all singing their own part, like in counterpoint harmony” (Billington et al., 2016a, p. 163); “There’s no return to the therapist...You’re not asked to relate personally: you just *do*” (Farrington et al., 2019, pp. 149–150); “it’s therapy by stealth” (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 295). Indeed, of deep importance to many participants at interview was how sharing human situations offered by literature enabled them not to think of themselves as “cases”: “Oh I’m not going mad,” as one participant put it, “someone else has had this experience. Somebody else is feeling that way” (Davis & Billington, 2020, p. 295). The stigma of ill-health is replaced by a nurturing openness: “It’s one of the few places I can go and not have people say “who you are is not right”” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 171).

The sense and feel of a close community and intimate emotional attachment (Robinson et al., 2019) engendered by sharing internal states via the literature, is widely attested in Shared Reading. Participants report: an active sense of belonging, within a “place,” psychological as much as physical, from which further development (flexibly and at their own pace) can ensue (Billington et al., 2014, 2016a, 2019b); a sense of acceptance, within an environment that is at once practically structured and emotionally “warm” through the creation of a personalised ethos (Davis et al., 2016); a renewed belief in the value of their own contribution, welcomed by those who have hitherto felt themselves to be in various ways redundant (Gray et al., 2016); a sense of the social as more than contact with others or the overcoming of isolation, but as an inherent value (Farrington et al., 2019). The humanising presence of literature creates a small-group community – almost an alternative mode of human society – in which the relation between private and public is closer than conventionally allowed and where “*inner* lives come *out*, and come out *together*” (Longden et al., 2015) to address complex and often painful meaning-of-life issues authentically and non-reductively (Billington et al., 2013; Billington & Davis, 2016).

The “group-ness” of Shared Reading is an area ripe for further research that can complement and verify the largely qualitative and experiential evidence that exists to date. One possibility proposed by a CRILS research team member (Rhiannon Corcoran) is that future research into group-ness in Shared Reading might consider using standard measures of “entitativity” (Islam, 2008). Also currently, CRILS’ research is considering what can be learned about the nature of the special interpersonal dynamic created in Shared Reading by considering the relationships between data from different modalities. These include synchrony and variation in heart rate between and within participants, skin conductance response, movement detection, emotion recognition of vocal or textual features, and variation in facial expressions and eye movements (Davis et al., 2019). Examined together with one another and alongside the qualitative and quantitative evidence outlined above, these physiological measures might help provide a stronger understanding of both conscious and unconscious mechanisms related to Shared Reading. What cannot be left out of account in future studies of Shared Reading for mental health and wellbeing is that the group experience is one immersed in the language of literature. “The read-aloud model facilitates the creation of a series of powerful interplays: between the written text and the aural experience; between hearing the text from outside and processing it within; between one’s own experience and that of the author and characters; between the privacy of personal consciousness and the public experience of group discussion. Readers experience what we might call interpersonality both with the book, and its author and characters, and with other group members” (Davis,

2009, p. 715). Literature, moreover, offers the widest possible human language in relation to experience and the one least interested in narrow symptomology. The poem or story does not know and cannot care whether its reader is well or ill. On the contrary, literature broadens and enriches the human norm, accepting and allowing for troubles, traumas, inadequacies, and other experiences usually classed as negative or pathological (Davis & Billington, 2016, pp. 401–402).

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