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A Bibliotherapeutic discourse on aging and masculinity in continuing care retirement communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined how the use of literary works in bibliotherapy groups for older men promotes discourse on aging and masculinity. Two groups of men from two different CCRCs in Israel participated in the study. Each group underwent 10 bibliotherapy sessions. Following reading aloud of literary works on aging, the participants were invited to share their reflections upon their life, inspired by the creations. An abductive analysis pointed to the central role of the literary elements in encouraging self-expressions among the participants. A qualitative content analysis revealed three themes, which indicate that the literary elements: (a) Encourage the expression of loss; (b) Allow participants to express aspects of positive aging; and (c) Promote insights regarding the acceptance of the aging process. In addition, an analysis focusing on aspects of form revealed four responses to literary elements: (a) Direct metaphors in line with the literary works' interpretations; (b) Creating new meaning for the original metaphors; (c) Expressing conflicting emotions through oxymorons; and (d) Relying on the authors' biographies as an extra-textual context for reflections. The study reflects an inter-disciplinary approach to promote expressions of aging masculinity, and to understand them in bibliotherapeutic groups of older affluent men.

Introduction

The transition to a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) is geared to provide the resident with several benefits including flexible services, social interactions and a growing sense of security. However, it also may be followed by challenges, such as privacy impairment, adaptation to a new place, and even loss and grief (Ayalon and Green, 2012). Although the transition may influence both women and men, the present study focuses on men who live in CCRCs and the way this aspect intersects with their experiences of aging masculinity. In the absence of cultural guidelines for aging as men, men in later life face the need to construct their identities according to standards of younger men (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016). This fact illuminates the importance of an open discourse on aging masculinity among older men to help them to re-construct new understandings.

Bibliotherapy relies on literature to integrate both feelings and cognitive responses to selected works of literature. This method was found to be an effective therapeutic method to help people in late life to cope with multifaceted challenges of old age (e.g., Eum et al., 2014; Malyn et al., 2020). Poems and songs are found to be effective mediums for eliciting the expression of thoughts and emotions. They help a person

to conjure up images and memories and facilitate communication and essential processes in old age (de Guzman and Laguilles-Villafuerte, 2021). The present study examines how a bibliotherapeutic discourse in groups of older men in CCRCs facilitates discussions on aging and masculinity.

Aging masculinity

Men perform a repertoire of masculinities that are central to their identity management throughout their life. However, the literature on aging masculinity points to the absence of cultural guidelines for aging as a man (Spector-Mersel, 2006). Consequently, men in late life tend to draw on the masculinity standards of younger men, which are shaped according to dimensions such as physical strength, sports, and sexuality. Unfortunately, older men often find it impossible to use these standards to define themselves and feel like 'real men' (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016). Cole and Saxton (2017) suggest that the intersection of aging and masculinity creates four interrelated challenges for most men over the course of their aging process: relevance, masculinity, love, and meaning. They note that in a postmodern and multicultural society, this is not always easy to achieve. Group

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counseling for older men can be a helpful setting in which to meet these needs and process these issues.

Living in a continuing care retirement community

Continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) in Israel are designed for functionally independent older adults, specifically those with financial means (Ayalon and Green, 2012). Research indicates that older adults prefer to stay in their homes for as long as possible (Bayer and Harper, 2000). Yet, as they age, older adults who can financially afford to relocate to a CCRC may decide to do so. This living arrangement provides older people with social interaction and companionship as well as autonomy and security (Graham and Tuffin, 2004; Groger and Kinney, 2007; Heisler et al., 2003). Another reason for the transition to a CCRC, is the desire not to burden family members. Therefore, the CCRC acts as a bridge between the older adults' wish to remain independent and their changing physical and mental needs (Krout and Wethington, 2003). Despite its advantages, moving to a CCRC might be followed by feelings of loss and grief (Ayalon and Green, 2012). Ageist perceptions (Dobbs et al., 2008; Lagacé et al., 2012) as well as self-ageism (Bodner et al., 2011), can also influence the adjustment process. Thus, the transition to a CCRC might symbolize their joining the "fourth age", and therefore threaten their identity. This process might be further intensified when it intersects with gender perceptions, more specifically with perceptions of masculinity in the second half of life (Cole and Saxton, 2017).

Bibliotherapy groups for older men

Group counseling for older men affords men the opportunity to explore gender roles, overcome loneliness, and engage in self-reflection and self-exploration in ways that may have been previously unavailable because of restrictive societal norms (Hensen and Koltz, 2018). However, due to gendered-socializations, men may still tend to share little of their emotional world (Cleary, 2012; Robertson and Monaghan, 2012). Bibliotherapy can bridge this gap by using literature to address diverse issues through reading activities via books, stories, and poetry, which can help participants reflect upon their own life (McCulliss, 2012). Bibliotherapy – a creative art therapy modality, uses literature to integrate both feelings and cognitive responses to selected works of literature. This can include printed texts, audiovisual materials, or creative writing. Bibliotherapy also serves as a clinical tool for mental health professionals who may combine literary materials, in addition to engaging in discussion, for the purpose of reflection, healing, and personal growth (Heath et al., 2005; McCulliss, 2012). It can be implemented as an individual therapy or in a group (Hynes, 2019). Its basic assumption is that the participants identify with literary characters like themselves – an association which helps them express and release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Gladding and Gladding, 1991). Bibliotherapy is an effective therapeutic method used to help people in late life cope with the multifaceted challenges of old age. It is recognized as a helpful method in both community-dwelling, as well as in long-term care and institutional settings (Eum et al., 2014). A community-based bibliotherapy framework which involved creative writing groups, was found to positively contribute to older adults' well-being. It provided a unique space in which participants felt acknowledged, accepted, challenged, and inspired (Malyn et al., 2020). Bibliotherapy was also found to be effective in increasing the self-management abilities of community-dwelling slightly to moderately frail older people (Frieswijk et al., 2006), and beneficial in providing a positive enduring impact on various aspects of older adults' well-being (Poerio and Totterdell, 2020). In institutional settings, a bibliotherapy intervention combined with reading aloud contributed to the emergence of empathy, confidence, and a sense of self-identity among older adults in psychiatric care. In addition, the participants reported that it helped them discuss topics freely, and to

articulate their feelings and emotions in a safe and supportive environment (Chamberlain, 2019).

Literary works are composed of literary elements, which give them their artistic structure. These include metaphors and oxymorons, images, symbols, intertextual connections with other texts of the culture, motifs, personifications, and more. These literary elements contribute to the texts' ambiguity and to their broad interpretive potential. This characteristic is highly relevant to bibliotherapy, as the literary works invite the participants to project facets of their inner world and reflect upon their life experiences following the reading activity (Hynes, 2019; Robinson, 2008). The interaction between the literary work and the reader has been extensively discussed by the *Reader response theory* (e.g., Iser, 1972, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) in the literary criticism. This theory suggests that literary work exists once it has been encountered and brought to life by a reader's re-making of it through interpretation. This statement points to the relationship between the text and the reader during the reading process. Iser (1972) stressed that reading is an active and creative process which engages the reader's imagination. He addressed the gaps in the text, the "unwritten" parts that stimulate the reader's creative participation to fill them with his own content.

Considering the numerous qualities of bibliotherapeutic groups, this study aims to explore the role of bibliotherapy, with an emphasis on the literary elements' impact on participants in a discourse on aging masculinities in groups of men in CCRCs.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in two CCRCs in two different cities in Israel. The participants were selected using criterion sampling. The inclusion criteria were men aged 70 and above, Hebrew speakers who have an affinity for literature, as well as social interaction and conversation. It was also emphasized that the participant should not have a hearing disability that cannot be modified with a hearing aid. They were recruited with the assistance of the CCRCs' social workers, who were informed by the researchers about the study's purpose and setting. After giving their consent to collaborate with the researchers, the social workers were instructed to approach participants who met the study criteria. Two groups were created: one from each CCRC. Group 1 included 10 participants and Group 2 included 7 participants. The average age of the participants was 84 and their education profile ranged from partial high school education to professorship.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Bar Ilan university's ethics committee. All participants agreed to participate voluntarily. After receiving a brief explanation of the research aims, participants signed an informed consent form and underwent a bibliotherapy group intervention of ten one-hour sessions each. The present study presents results from the first eight sessions that focused on the literary work presented in the Appendix. The remaining two sessions focused on the creation of artistic work by the participants. This is discussed in a different paper.

The group sessions were facilitated by the first author, who is also a bibliotherapist. In each session, the facilitator read aloud to the group texts about aging taken from Israeli literature. Some of the texts were poems and some were passages from prose. Each session focused on a specific topic related to old age, for example: body image, family relationships, friendship, and sexuality. The order of the topics was determined based on the level of intimacy it requires from the group. Hence, more emotionally distressing topics were discussed towards the last sessions. Most of the texts were written by well-known authors, whose biographies are interwoven with Israeli history and culture. For a detailed description of selected works, see the Appendix. The facilitator also presented a short background about the authors. Following the

reading and inspired by the literary texts, the participants were invited to reflect upon their life and to share thoughts, emotions, opinions, and experiences. Written guidelines were used as semi-structured group interviews. Sample questions in the interview's guidelines included: "How does the image of the olive tree in the poem make you feel?"; "Which sentence in the poem can you identify with? Please explain"; "What do you think about the life routine that the author describes?". The facilitator conducted the group discussions. All the sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

This research used an abductive approach to data analysis in qualitative research (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), which involves the researchers' immersion in and deliberate turning or moving away from the task of scrutinizing evidence to stay open to possibilities and expand the potential of the collected data (Rinehart, 2021). Thus, the abductive methodology provides the researchers with opportunities to develop novel theoretical insights (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The analytical process involves thinking about intriguing findings and then returning to the field to re-check our assumptions (Charmaz, 2009).

After familiarizing ourselves with the transcripts, we started the preliminary coding. Being open to other possibilities which were embedded in the study design, the data, and the theories (Brinkmann, 2014), we decided to focus on the use of literary elements in participants' responses. In this context we examined aspects of content which provide the answer to the 'what' (i.e., what were the contents raised by participants?) as well as aspects of form which answered the question of 'how' (i.e., how did these contents come up?). Our decision to focus on these questions relied on previous research findings suggesting the contribution of bibliotherapeutic discourse to self-expression (e.g., Chamberlain, 2019; Poerio and Totterdell, 2020).

Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted by the first author, managing a coding process which was reviewed by the second author. The first step included detecting statements that highlight the role of the literature during the discussion on aging masculinities in the groups. The next step involved grouping the statements into units of meaning (themes and subthemes), including quotes, to describe the participants' perceptions. To safeguard coding, the researchers discussed their personal perspectives of the issues under study, attempting to disregard their personal values and biases (Gilgun, 2015; Tufford and Newman, 2012). By arranging the data based on themes emerging from participants' descriptions, and separating their interpretive notes, we attempted to identify themes that reflected the participants' experiences, rather than the researchers' preconceived opinions.

Findings

The study's findings are presented in two parts. The first part focuses on content. It presents the themes related to aging masculinities that were identified during the bibliotherapeutic discourse, emphasizing the role of the literary elements. The second part focuses on form and presents themes that reflect the relationship between the literary elements and the participants' reflections beyond the specific content. In other words, it explores how the literary elements work and encourage the participants to respond and to share their experiences. This two-phase analysis, which explores aspects of content and form, sheds light on how bibliotherapy can promote meaningful group discourse on aging masculinities.

Aspects of content

The thematic analysis revealed three major themes which describe how the literary elements helped participants express their perceptions and emotional world regarding aging masculinities. The literary

elements: (a) encourage the expression of loss; (b) allow participants to express aspects of positive aging; and (c) promote insights regarding the acceptance of the aging process.

The literary elements encourage expressions of loss

Discussions of the literary elements, their representations, and interpretations inspired the participants to reflect upon a wide range of aspects and meanings regarding their own aging process, including those sensitive issues and losses that come with age. It encouraged them to share experiences of loss in relation to physical abilities as well as their social world. Some participants expressed a sense of reduced self-esteem because of the loss of their social roles. The loss of sexuality in old age was also discussed, as was the loss of their loved ones. Finally, several participants whose wives live with advanced dementia expressed an *ambiguous loss*. These men could express their experiences of living with partners who are physically present, but psychologically absent (Boss and Yeats, 2014). The following quote illustrates how the "desert" metaphor in a poem¹ encouraged one of the participants to share his personal experience upon facing such a situation:

...deserts are desolate places... In the evening, I go to sleep alone in bed. My wife is in the dementia ward; she doesn't even know who I am. I feel I am in the desert, alone. This is even worse than a loss, because when there is a loss, you know that that's it, it's finished, you have to start something else. But when she is in five floors above me, and I am alone... (Participant 10).

An example of another kind of loss is demonstrated in the following quote, in which the participant describes the loss of sexuality that comes with age, following the reading of the same poem:

Love is an inconstant concept, it changes. The beginning of love is youthful passion, that's how it starts... after that, it can go in many directions, but... in the end there is no longer passion... there is [the life you] shared... If there's anything left [at the end], it's the commitment... anyone looking for the youthful passion of young love will not find it in old age, it no longer exists. (Participant 7).

The literary elements enable participants to express aspects of positive aging

Alongside the losses, the literary elements also inspired the participants to reflect upon positive aging aspects such as healthy lifestyles, positive thinking, family and interpersonal relationships, financial security, and social support networks. The following quotes demonstrate a 94-year-old man's positive approach to aging. This participant referred to the intertextual biblical reference "Every day there is a new [thing] under the sun" in a poem,² to share his reflection on his cognitively active life as an older man. He emphasized how this kind of lifestyle enables him to maintain a sense of interest and social involvement:

First thing in the morning, I listen to the news. If I missed it, there's a software program that allows me to listen to the latest news. I read three newspapers and then I know what's new under the sun...I want to know what's going on ...it interests me to know what's happening in Egypt and other places, not just the local troubles. When I read three newspapers, I get much more than that. For example, a Republican Party conference led by Trump is now being held in the United States, and he made some crazy announcements there. It doesn't concern me personally, but it bothers me. So, for me, "new [thing] under the sun" means keeping abreast of things... knowing what's happening [in the world]. (Participant 16).

¹ Barzilai, Y. (2009). Beikvot hazman ha'avud [Following the lost time]. *Ma'amakim – Ktav Et Virtuali le'Sifrut Ve'Omanut*, 26.

² Goldberg, L. (1954). Shirei Sof Ha'Derech [End of the road songs]. *Dvar Hapoelt*, 20(2-3).

The literary elements promote insights regarding acceptance of the aging process

As artistic means, some literary elements are powerful because they contain double meanings, ambivalence, paradoxes, conflicts, or oppositions. This unique artistic characterization can reliably represent the complexity of the emotional world of older adults, which often consists of contrasts. Our findings suggest that these types of literary elements invited the participants to reflect upon life experiences which evoke similar emotions. Some were inspired by this pattern and expressed a sense of acceptance regarding the aging process. Such an emotional position requires recognition of the changes that accompany the aging process, and the need to adjust to the new circumstances. In the following quote, a participant describes how he accepts the natural process of “slowing down”, and his decision to stop focusing on financial ambitions. His description also reflects his acceptance of this new way of life as an older man. This participant commented on a particular sentence in a poem: “the old man sat by the road to rest”.³ One possible interpretation of this sentence is that the ‘resting’ of the old man in the poem represents activity and not passivity, as he reminisces and reflects upon his life course. This interpretation, which has a double meaning of activity and passivity, was discussed in the group, and led the participant to share the following reflection:

I've done a lot of things in my life... I feel I've reached now the phase where I don't have to get into something new all the time. Yesterday, someone called me on the phone. He's from a company that I did a lot of businesses with. He said he had a good real estate offer for me... I told him 'forget it, I'm done with all that'. This is old age talking... (Participant 13).

The participant seems to be describing a passive reaction, but in fact he is describing an active and conscious decision, which provides him with a sense of agency and adjustment to the present circumstances of being an older man.

Aspects of form

This analysis examines the literary mechanisms which helped the participants expand their self-expression during the sessions. It focuses on the use of literary elements to encourage reflections upon life experiences. The analysis revealed four responses to literary elements: (a) Direct metaphors in line with the literary works' interpretations; (b) Creating new meaning for the original metaphors; (c) Expressing conflicting emotions through oxymorons; and (d) Relying on the authors' biographies as an extra-textual context for reflections.

Direct metaphors in line with the literary works' interpretations

Through the unique combinations of words, the literary texts illuminate significant meanings to moments in life, which people are usually not aware of. Therefore, by reading and interpreting their meanings, literary texts help readers find new paths of self-expression and ways in which to address various aspects of life that would not be accessible in regular conversation. The last part of the *End of the Road Songs*,⁴ is titled *A Prayer*, in which the poet asks God to bless her with the ability to appreciate even the smallest moments in life. Following the reading of this part, one of the participants described how this idea has been manifested in his life, representing additional personal growth in old age. He also gives explanations for this phenomenon:

I want to talk about an experience. I'm in the period where I go at the sea [a lot] and [one day] I see a little three-year-old girl... she's naked and has curly hair... [She's got] the pail and the shovel [and she's digging] ... I look at her... I take a picture of her and absorb all of her

energy, all the beauty - I absorb it all, everything I see. All of her movements... enliven me... this experience - to see a little girl. Young people don't notice it, [but] I notice... I also see it in plants. In the spring, there are insects - for me everything is buzzing. Since there's more free time, you suddenly notice things that you never noticed before [as a young man], because you worked and were busy... He [the old man described in the poem] also knows that his days are numbered, maybe it's a matter of weeks, ... suddenly he has so much to say about nature, and he thinks about how his whole life, he never noticed it. (Participant 6).

This participant identifies with the poem's message, and gives a metaphor of his own, describing how he “absorbs” the unique and exciting moments he now sees in his life, feels them with all his senses, in a way that is similar to that of the poet.

Another participant refers to the metaphor “our good years have been retired”.⁵ This metaphor causes him to reflect upon his couplehood experience with his wife, who passed away, and the changes in their sexuality over the years, basing his descriptions on the same metaphor:

When my wife and I first became lovers, we were members of a kibbutz. We'd known each other for many years before, but when we became lovers there was immense passion... we lived this passion. WOW! This wasn't any 'ordinary' mediocre life. Except for the work that each one of us did on the kibbutz, we were fully engaged in the enthusiasm of our relationships, the love... We started a family, we had good times together, we built a good life for ourselves, raised the children with understanding. We were happy together for more than fifty [years]... But [as older people] it was no longer the great passion [we had in the beginning]. There's no doubt that in the beginning it was a [real] celebration, and [we had] some excellent years - it was wonderful... and later it was still good, but there's a huge difference between the great and the good. It's the difference between the routine and the celebration. I think [it's impossible] to hold on to the celebration for fifty years. It's a pace that you can't keep up with, you burn out. The beautiful years have finally been retired. (Participant 13).

Creating new meanings for the original metaphors

Whereas some responses were consistent with the accepted interpretation, other participants used the literary elements, especially metaphors, as stimuli for original thinking and reflection. They used the literary works' metaphors as a reference point, and then changed them, and reshaped them to create a meaning that reflected their own personal experience. This mechanism enabled the participants to articulate their thoughts deeply and accurately. The following quote illustrates how the metaphor “congested peace” in the poem *The Olive Trees*,⁶ led one participant to address the opposite meaning of the original one:

...There is the proverb: “His old age shames his youth”. We have a resident on the first floor whose old age shames his youth... not all old people are congested peace, not all old people... Regarding the resident from the first floor, it is blessed and good that he doesn't know what he's like. (Participant 1).

We can infer that the metaphor “congested peace” is used as a stimulus for this participant to share his thoughts about the fearful aspect of the aging process, and to give expression to his negative emotions as well.

Another example of creating new meaning following a given metaphor is by expanding its context. One of the participants, who had been

³ Barzilai, 2009.

⁴ Goldberg, L. (1996). Atzei Ha'Za'it [The Olive Trees]. In A. Ben Gurion (ed.), *Hoz'er el Atzmecha* [Return to yourself] (p. 40). Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House.

³ Goldberg, 1954.

⁴ Goldberg, 1954.

divorced for many years, commented on the metaphoric sentence “let there be your neglected lap among my sown fields” in the poem *Following the Lost Time*.⁷ While most participants claimed that the poem's focus is the author's wife, who lives with him for a long time, participant 6 presented a different view. By making some changes in the original metaphor, this participant adjusted it to fit his point of view and personal experience, as shown in the following quote:

... Let's be clear, there are many 'fields' in couplehood. And what makes the connection a good one is time... The more time passes, the more it connects two people who weren't [together] from the beginning... But time does its thing. It is said that even among pigeons, when one is gone, they connect again with others... you can follow them and observe this. So, we also have connections. And if we talk about 'Chapter 2' [second couplehood] – there are many fields ...[a second chance is possible]... The two people become connected. It doesn't happen in a day, like young love... [in this case], it happens little by little, each one with his or her own personality, their potential... but it also happens in 'Chapter 2'. (Participant 6).

As we can see, this participant borrows the “field” metaphor from the poem and interweaves it in the context of his personal experience. Hence, the initial meaning of the metaphor undergoes change and readjustment in order to reflect his personal understanding.

Expressing conflicting emotions through oxymorons

As works of art, literary works can include diverse meanings, as well as conflicting ideas and paradoxes. An *oxymoron* is a literary element, comprised of the combination of two words that seem to be mutually contradictory (Dupriez, 1991). Oxymorons have the effect of creating an impression, enhancing a concept, and entertaining the reader. Similarly, metaphors can also shed new light on some ideas through the merging of concepts from different semantic fields. An oxymoron can also be a metaphor. Some of the participants were inspired by this pattern of merging opposites and concepts from different semantic worlds, thereby creating new meanings. Discussing these new meanings allowed the participants to express a sense of ambivalence and complexity, which often, as mentioned, was manifested as a sense of acceptance of the aging process. This mechanism also makes it possible to address the issue of end of life. One of the participants referred to the following image “emerges as a burst of fresh sting out of the punched stem”, which appeared in a poem.⁸ The ambivalence embedded in this image – the beginning of life versus the end of life – led him to express his ambivalence concerning an older man who recognizes that time is limited, whilst at the same time acknowledging the continuity of his family's new generations, with a sense of satisfaction, acceptance, and completion with the natural course of life. The following quote illustrates his complex emotional experience:

Emerges as a burst of fresh sting out of the punched stem. That is to say, we are already a punched stem, we have already left the place. The grandson is new, flourishing, emerging, exposed. This is the circle of life, in my opinion... it hurts me, it reminds me that I am already with one leg out the door [of life], but it's [also] a joy after all. Grandchildren... when my first great-grandson was born, I looked around... it was hard for me to believe – am I so old? I already have great-grandchildren. But this is a fact – that we go, and they come. (Participant 1).

Another participant expressed feelings of ambivalence, following the metaphor “our good years have been retired”.⁹ He talked about the good and loving relationship he'd enjoyed with his deceased wife, which

deepened as they grew older. While he appreciated this achievement, he also described how this late intimacy made the pain of his wife's loss much harder:

I say that as the years pass... the marriage becomes totally different. A mutual dependency begins to take shape, the real love between the two people is clearly revealed. And [when the two are forced to] part, it's very, very hard. Especially when I talk, like now, about myself... I was with my wife for sixty-two years, it's a life, an entire lifetime [together]... we started with nothing and created something. We started from zero, we lived in a shack. There's a sentence my wife once said, which I can never forget: “I want a penthouse”. I told [her] “there's no money... two people in a penthouse? [Even] the dogs will laugh at us”. She said: “I want to leave this shack for a palace” ... This is the life you go through with another person. You build yourself up together with her, we build ourselves, raise children, educate them, [give them] a higher education. And it gives you satisfaction in life when you see that your work has real results... the children all have the professions they wanted, thank God. But then you're left alone, it's hard... and the memories remain. (Participant 15).

Just as the metaphor “our good years have been retired” embodies a double meaning of good memories together with the pain of loss, so too does this participant express his experience, with the additional aspect of the long-term relationship and how it changes and matures over time.

The authors' biographies as an extra-textual context for reflections

Most of the selected literary works were written by well-known Israeli writers, who have left a deep mark on Israeli culture. The participants were usually familiar with some milestone of the authors' biographies, as well as their connections to Israeli history. The authors' biographies, therefore, served as extra-textual contexts, beyond the written words. The following quote illustrates how one of the participants criticizes the ability of the poet, who died young, to have an in-depth understanding of the aging experience and to reliably represent it. Through his criticism, he gives voice to his fears as an older man:

Leah Goldberg [the poet] didn't know and didn't reach old age. She died relatively young. How, then, can she speak [about aging] from the depths of her heart?... When you read her, something is missing... She didn't have a lot of life experience... The real life of an older person, the fears, the fear of death, the fear of life. I can't find it here [in the poem]; it's missing. (Participant 4).

Another extra-textual reflection regarding the author's biography occurs when the participants expand their interpretations about the texts based on their familiarity with the authors' background. The fifth session focused on body image in old age, following the reading of a paragraph from the book *The Way to the Cats*¹⁰ by Yehoshua Kenaz. In the following quote, we can see how a participant constructs his self-presentation inspired by his knowledge about the author's perceptions:

Yehoshua Kenaz, whom I know, says you're not guilty [because you have wrinkles]. [He would have said] I, Yehoshua Kenaz, have come to terms with my wrinkles, because he was almost at the age of most of us here, a little bit over eighty. So, he said, I accept my ugliness, and inability to move. The Yehoshua Kenaz that I knew repeats more than once that he has come to terms with his aging, with his bent back, with the ugliness, with the dreams that he can no longer realize... with the fact that he's heading towards deterioration and annihilation. This is his world, and it isn't [only] related to this novel. I find it suitable for this novel as well... In the end, you're not guilty, this is our old age. (Participant 17).

⁷ Barzilay, 2009.

⁸ Raab, E. (1996). Ha'neched [The Grandson]. In A. Ben Gurion (ed.), *Hoz'er el Atzmecha* [Return to yourself] (p. 43). Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House.

⁹ Barzilay, 2009.

¹⁰ Kenaz, Y. (1994). *The way to the cats*. Steerforth Press.

Discussion

This study examined the discourse around aging masculinities among older CCRC male residents. Our analysis combined content and form. The content analysis revealed three major themes, reflecting the ways in which the literary elements encouraged the participants to share experiences regarding loss, positive aging, and acceptance of the aging process. The form analysis outlined the literary mechanisms which helped the participants to expand their self-expression during the sessions.

In line with the reader response theory (Iser, 1972, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) apparently the literary elements contributed to the activation of the participants' imagination, as well as their memories and emotional world. Moreover, the literary elements created an 'aesthetic distance' between the participants and the literary works. This phenomenon is a result of the use of artistic tools and techniques to break the illusion and inhibit readers from immersing themselves in the literary world portrayed in the work they read. The aesthetic distance, therefore, helps create a liminal space, an invisible but consciously perceivable border between reality and fiction (Čechová, 2017). Through metaphors, images, intertextuality, or symbols the participants were able to get some perspective. This, in turn, enabled them to identify with the texts without becoming emotionally overwhelmed by their feelings.

This sense of being "protected" allowed them to reflect upon sensitive issues and express them without feeling threatened. It also allowed them to acknowledge positive aspects of aging, such as new opportunities for social involvement, intellectual and physical activity, familial relationships, and development of new skills. Consequently, they could come to term with their aging, containing and integrating the ambivalence of loss and grief on one side, and growth and satisfaction on the other side. Some participants described their experience of change throughout the aging process, addressing a change in attitude towards goal setting and objectives in life and adapting to their abilities and needs during this period of life.

These findings are consistent with positive aging theories (e.g., Baltes and Carstensen, 1996; Row and Kahn, 1998). This theory suggests that positive aging is a multidimensional term, combining different concepts that describe good aging: optimal aging, successful aging, positive health, and productivity. It consists of five factors: health, cognition, activity, affect and physical fitness and is manifested in a wide range of bio-psychosocial factors. Positive aging is also expressed in a person's ability to develop flexibility in order to cope with the changes that occur during aging and to use the available resources effectively, so that the aging process is optimal (Hill, 2005).

These findings are also consistent with the characterization of the transition to a CCRC. While older adults face many losses, the transition to a CCRC might evoke additional feelings of loss and grief (Ayalon and Green, 2012). However, the social interaction, the autonomy and the security provided by this living arrangement (Groger and Kinney, 2007), which was specifically designed for affluent and functionally independent older adults (Ayalon and Green, 2012), contribute to the sense of positive aging and therefore to acceptance of the aging process.

The bibliotherapeutic discourse of form was characterized by four mechanisms. This part provides an explanation for the ways in which the literary elements act to elicit emotional and cognitive responses among participants. While the contribution of bibliotherapy for older adults has already been discussed in previous works (e.g., Eum et al., 2014; Malyn et al., 2020), The novelty of the present study is the exposure of mechanisms by which an open dialogue can be promoted and developed.

Our findings suggest that the use of literary texts characterized by richness in literary elements, such as metaphors and images, opens diverse paths to self-expression and reflection. In addition, the use of literary elements that fold within them a conflicting or paradoxical meanings, help the participants to relate to their internal conflicting contents, and provide them with the legitimacy to contain paradoxes,

which characterize old age. For example, a person may refer on the one hand to the cumulative experiences of loss, and on the other hand to satisfaction with the continuity and the transmission of the family heritage to future generations.

The cultural context of literary texts is also an important factor in bibliotherapeutic discourse among older men. The content of the texts (poems or prose) is linked to historical events of society, to ideologies as well as to stereotypical representations of masculinity. For example, poems that hint at wars evoked participants' personal stories about their military service. This topic occupies a central place in the discourse on masculinity in Israeli society, especially among the generation of the participants in the present study. The authors' biography is also rooted in the cultural context. Therefore, not surprisingly, it provoked a lively and important discourse in the groups. The findings of the study suggest that this should be considered, both in the process of selecting the literary materials, and in devoting time to referring to the author's biography during the therapeutic sessions.

Finally, the study provides a new look on aging masculinity. Whereas findings from previous studies have shown that older men tend to define themselves in light of standards of "young masculinity," based on dimensions such as physical strength, athleticism, or sexuality (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016), our research findings point to a broader and more complex picture. The study participants expressed different types of losses, some of which were described on the basis of a comparison with the younger period of their lives (such as the loss of physical abilities) or concerned the loss of loved ones. At the same time, they described pathways of development and growth in old age. These include processes of discovering new talents and processes of self-realization, development of mental abilities, which provide them with a greater sense of enjoyment and appreciation of their lives, and expressions of wisdom based on rich life experience.

The selective optimization with compensation model (Baltes and Baltes, 1990) conceptualizes successful aging as a lifelong process of maximizing gains and minimizing losses by means of three processes: selection, optimization, and compensation. These three processes become particularly important during old age, due to age-related changes in the availability and efficiency of resources (Baltes, 1997). In line with this model, some of the participants have described processes of flexing rigid patterns of behavior, in a way that allows them to adapt their behaviors and attitudes to the changes that accompany the aging process, while utilizing their abilities and resources. For example, declining business opportunities, which in the past the person did not refuse, in favor of rest and enjoyment of free time as a retired man with financial means. Hence, old age does not necessarily manifest only as decline and loss, but also as the accumulation of abilities and new qualities. It seems, then, that bibliotherapeutic discourse, based on reading literature elements that address old age, allowed study participants to step beyond the narrow boundaries of identity definition considering the standards of "young masculinity" and to delineate more flexible and open boundaries of older, aging masculinity, with a supportive sense of partnership and normalization.

Along with its strengths, the present study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our study consisted of only two groups; thus, our knowledge concerning the findings' generalizability is impaired. In addition, our sample represents older men in CCRCs – affluent institutions, which cater to individuals of high socioeconomic status. Moreover, as the literature used in this study was written in Hebrew by Israeli authors, it would be interesting to learn more about the use of translated works in such groups. Translated works would allow for additional distance between the reader and the literary creation (Čechová, 2017). Nonetheless, our findings suggest an interdisciplinary point of view regarding the combination between bibliotherapy, gender and aging studies. Its results shed light on the literature's pragmatic dimension, and its potential to promote discourse on the life experiences of men in late life.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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Appendix A

A description of the sessions' topics and the selected literature.

Session No.	Topic	Literary source	Poem/Prose
1	Experiences of aging	Goldberg, Lea (1954). Shirei Sof Ha'Derech [End of the road songs]. <i>Dvar Hapoelt</i> , 20(2–3).	Poem
2	Images from the natural world for the aging process	Goldberg, Lea (1996). Atzei Ha'Za'it [The Olive Trees] In A. Ben Gurion (ed.), <i>Hozer el Atzmecha [Return to yourself]</i> (p. 40). Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House.	Poem
3	Social roles and professional identity	Yehoshua, Abraham, B. (2018). <i>Haminhara [The tunnel]</i> . Hakibutz Hameuhad.	Prose
4	Achievements and regrets	Zach, Natan (2008). Adam hai ba'olam [A person live in the world]. In N. Zach. Kol hashirim veshirim hadashim [<i>All the poems and new poems</i>], vol 1. Hakibutz Hameuhad. Gouri, Haim (2011). Harata meuheret [Late regret]. In H. Gouri, <i>Hashirim [The poems]</i> , vol. 3. Hakibutz Hameuhad.	Poem
5	Body image and masculinity	Kenaz, Y. (1994). <i>The way to the cats</i> . Steerforth Press	Prose
6	Love, intimacy and sexuality	Barzilai, Ya'akov (2009). Beikvot hazman ha'avud [Following the lost time]. <i>Ma'amakim – Ktav Et Virtuali le'Sifrut Ve'Omanut</i> , 26.	Poem
7	Fatherhood and grandfatherhood	Raab, Ester (1996). Ha'neched [The Grandson]. In A. Ben Gurion (ed.), <i>Hozer el Atzmecha [Return to yourself]</i> (p. 43). Hakibutz Hameuchad.	Poem
8	Friendship	Oz, Amos (2012). <i>Ben haverim [Between friends]</i> , Keter.	Prose

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