



State of poetry therapy research (review)

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to give an overview of the state of poetry therapy research, thus offering a basis for designing and carrying out optimized study projects and contributing to the further establishment of poetry therapy. Database research was carried out using Amed, Cochrane, Embase, Medline, Psycinfo and Psycindex. The search words used were 'poetry therapy', 'therapeutic writing' and 'writing therapy'. The studies were classified according to country, subject, publication date and level of evidence-based medicine. A total of 1129 entries were found, 203 of which were used for this analysis. The majority of the studies were conducted in the United States in the fields of psychiatry and psychology. Investigative activities reached the highest levels in the period from 1999 to 2010. Most of the studies corresponded to level 5 on the scale of evidence-based medicine. The findings show that poetry therapy is already more established and documented in the United States than in other countries. The greatest amount of experience has been collected in the fields of psychiatry and psychology. Studies in other areas (e.g. oncology), however, point to future ranges of application. The rising levels of interest over the past 10 years in poetry therapy and its scientific establishment have encouraged additional research projects for which appropriate evaluation methods need to be developed.

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Background

Different forms of expressive art therapies originate from and are influenced by the natural sciences, social sciences and aesthetics. Music, dance, rituals and the artistic use of images and words have provided individuals as well as groups with orientation and counsel across all cultural epochs from the past up to the present day. Expressive art therapies not only represent cognitive therapeutic starting points, but also emotional and action-oriented ones. Over the course of history in psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, special education and increasingly in the case of acute and chronic physical illness, these complementary forms of therapy have become a therapeutic option that can no longer be disregarded. For several decades, the various types of expressive art therapies – ranging from music therapy to fine arts therapies and from dance movement therapy to drama, language, poetry and bibliotherapy – have taken on an increasingly essential role in the therapy options of many medical institutions (Aldridge, Gruber, Kunzmann, & Weis, 2002).

Growing professionalization of expressive art therapies

In the United States, poetry therapy and other expressive art therapies like dance, music, gestalt and drama therapy, have long been recognized. A professional organization exists for poetry therapists and annual congresses are held. Even though there are descriptions dating back to antiquity of the healing power of different arts, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that a few individuals began to put additional focus on the therapeutic relevance of artistic and poetic expression among healthy and sick persons. Accordingly, when compared with other scientific disciplines, the researching of expressive art therapies and poetry therapy in particular remains a rather new discipline (Gruber, Frieling, & Weis, 2002). For the past 15 years, there has been a marked trend towards forming a scientific basis for these firmly established expressive art therapies options, which are now employed in many medical, rehabilitative, psychotherapeutic and instructional institutions. These efforts are motivated not least by the demand of cost bearers to demonstrate proof of the necessity and effectiveness of these therapy methods. Moreover, these efforts are motivated by a range of universities, educational institutes, research institutes and professional organizations that are rising to this challenge within the context of the growing professionalization of expressive art therapies – and hereby poetry therapy as well (Henn & Gruber, 2004).

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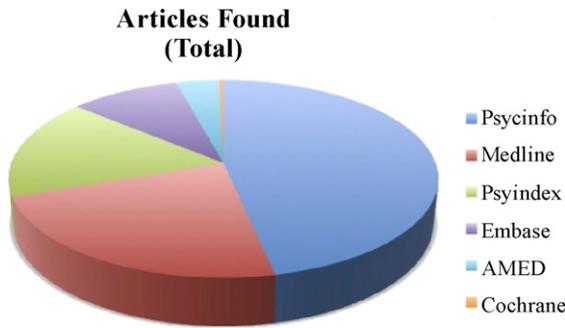


Fig. 1. Percentage of the 1129 articles in all databases.

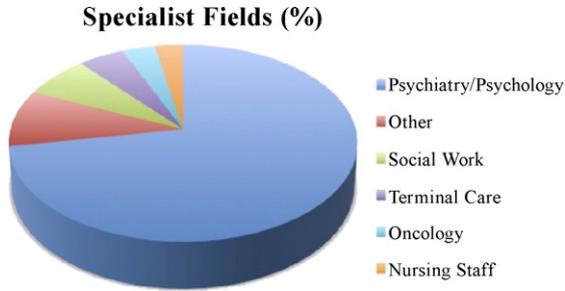


Fig. 2. Articles in specific fields.

Effects of poetry therapy and its practical applications

There are numerous comprehensive interpretations of the general effects of poetry therapy and its practical applications (Leedy, 1970; Lerner, 1997; McArdle & Byrt, 2001; Morrison, 1986; Silverman, 1988). Poetry therapy’s regulating, balancing, alleviating, healing and integrating effects have long been used in the fields of psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychology. In addition, a trend has emerged, which continuously brings to light new aspects of poetry therapy and has paved the way for poetry therapy to now be seen as a holistic, interdisciplinary treatment method (Antebi, 1986; Sampson & Visser, 2005).

Poetry in the context of social work

Poetry therapy, however, is not only employed in the medical field, but also within the context of social work (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002; Mazza, 1996). Creative and therapeutic writing is increasingly used in the therapy, education and advancement of children and young adults, in strengthening their feelings of self-esteem, in supporting their process of self-discovery, in facilitating communication and social integration, and in developing

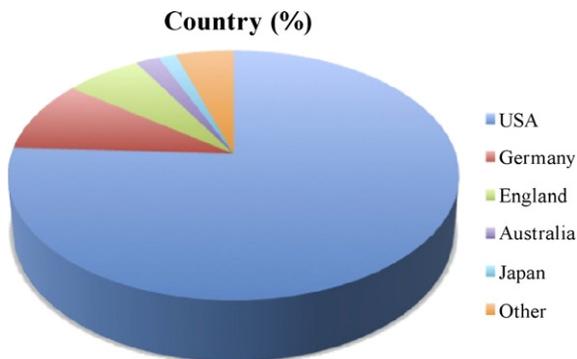


Fig. 3. Articles from different countries.

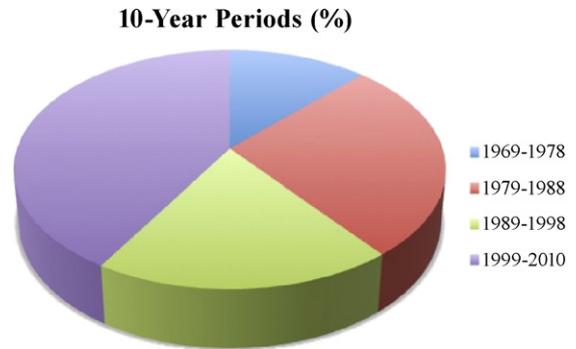


Fig. 4. Articles published from 1969 until May 15, 2010.

creative abilities as resources (Abell, 1998; Angelotti, 1985; Seiden, 2007; Thwaite, Bennett, Pynor, & Zigmond, 2003). In addition to the integration of poetry therapy into the daily clinical work of psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychosomatics, creative writing is also increasingly seen as valuable in working with elderly people. In this context, it offers an outlet for psychological expression and communication, while also easing the burden on caregivers in terms of time constraints and emotional strain – which are often considerable – by giving the patients a chance to be independently active and contribute to their own healing process and maintaining their health (Bresler, 1981).

Poetry therapy and cancer treatment

For coming to terms with extreme situations like impending death or life-threatening illnesses like cancer, writing has also proven to be exceptionally useful by offering patients the opportunity to look back on their lives and history and enabling them to accept their own illness and passing in a peaceable manner. In addition, the documents composed within the framework of poetry therapy can be passed on to subsequent generations, which preserves knowledge and experiences and can often have a comforting effect on the affected parties and sometimes can help lead to a strengthening or revival of relations with relatives (Gardner, 2006; Petzold, 1982; Robinson, 2004). In oncology, poetry therapy has been shown to improve quality of life and contribute to helping patients cope with their illness. The growing improvements in terms of therapeutic options in surgery, radiology and internal oncology, in particular, have not only resulted in improved chances of healing and longer life, but also entail a major burden on patients’ quality of life that cannot be ignored. Accordingly, it is common for the psyche of patients suffering from cancer to be strongly influenced not only by the illness itself, but also by the treatment (Aldridge et al., 2002). Therefore a field has evolved within oncology

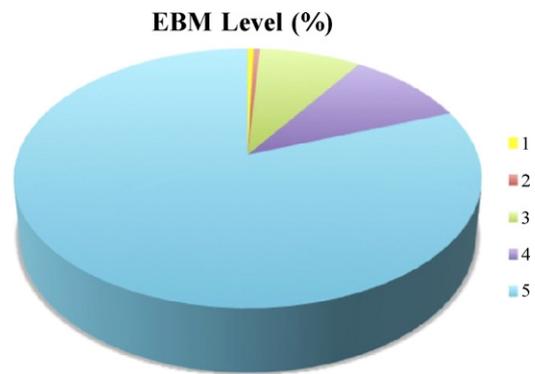


Fig. 5. Level of evidence-based medicine (EBM level) of articles.

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