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### “I Feel Normal Here”: The Social Functions of a Book Club in a Residential Recovery Program

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**Abstract:** Book clubs are gatherings around shared texts; they have the potential to build strong interpersonal bonds (Pittman & Honchell, 2014; Porath, 2018). This study examines a weekly book club in a residential treatment center for female addicted trauma survivors and offers contrast to research on book clubs in non-restrictive settings. We address, “What are the social functions of a book club in a restrictive setting?” We drew upon sociocultural theory, specifically, literacy as a social practice which focuses on cultural literacy practices embedded in local contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Perry, 2012) that people draw upon in particular interactions (Barton, 2001). The findings focus on three primary social functions of the book club as developing: 1) a reading identity through the habit of reading and discussing books, 2) a sense of belonging to a book club, and 3) a sense of normalcy. The discussion considers this book club in relation to: 1) others held in restrictive and non-restrictive settings, 2) the establishment of a sense of community; and 3) a sense of normalcy and agency. This research offers insight into ways literacy practices, such as book clubs, meet the often-unrecognized needs of individuals and communities in restrictive environments.

**Keywords:** book club, homeless, literacy, rehabilitation program, reading, social practice



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**P**ortia, a member of a weekly book club, described laughing while reading the memoir *The Glass Castle* (Walls, 2006) at a point when the family is particularly dysfunctional. Questioning the appropriateness of her reaction, she

decided to check in with others also reading the book. She recalled,

And I started knocking on everybody’s door like, ‘Have you read this?’ Because I wanted to know what I was supposed to do. I can’t

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

believe I went and did that [laughed]. ‘Am I supposed to be laughing at this?’ And everybody started reading it and everybody started laughing. It was amazing.

As is common in many book clubs, Portia was eager to talk with others. In this case, she was particularly interested in how others’ reactions aligned with her own. Portia’s self-reflective stance is integral to her day-to-day interactions, especially now as a participant in a recovery program. When Portia says “everybody,” she is referring to the other women at New Beginnings, a long-term residential program for mothers who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol and are homeless. The notion of book club members living side-by-side sharing the intimate process of recovery made us wonder, “What are the social functions of a book club in a restrictive setting?”

Book clubs, alternatively known as literature circles, book groups, reading groups, and literature discussion groups are gatherings in which a shared text plays some role, although the prominence and surrounding conversation varies widely (Beach & Yussen, 2011; Long, 2003; Pittman & Honchell, 2014; Porath, 2018). The mandatory book club at New Beginnings contrasts with voluntary book clubs that determine their own attendance. Upon entering New Beginnings, women decided (some by court mandate) to live within an institution designed to prevent the future use of illegal drugs/alcohol. Strict rules require residents to participate in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, parenting classes, and counseling. Residents are not allowed to leave the premises or interact with people beyond the walls of the shelter without permission.

There is little research on adult book clubs conducted in such restrictive environments (for exceptions see Sweeney, 2010, on reading practices in jails Holman, MacGillivray, Salem & Tarbett, 2018 and Billington, 2011, on book clubs in recovery programs). The

previous research (Holman, et al., 2018, Billington, 2011; Sweeney, 2010) is important because it examines literacy’s potential to develop relationships, increase personal awareness, foster individual agency (Winn, 2011), and serve as a balm in times of crisis (Holman, et al., 2018). Literacy practices may include enjoyable, affordable, and effective activities which nourish individuals as they seek to better their lives.

To further an understanding of adult literacy practices in restricted environments, we focus on a book club that was part of a longitudinal case study on literacy practices in a homeless family shelter for women in recovery (for more information see MacGillivray, Curwen, & Ardell, 2016, Holman, et al., 2018). Through this qualitative inquiry, we also seek to contribute to what Greenburg, Ginsburg, and Wrigley (2017) refer to as a “paucity of recent research on sociocultural aspects of adult reading” (p. 217). We foreground the women’s agency in determining the book club’s social functions. They co-constructed the social practice (Barton, 2007) by their decisions to read the texts, their reading responses, and their interactions with each other. This is a significant stance because these residents are saddled with the descriptors of “homeless,” “addicts,” and “single mothers,” that are imbued with hegemonic assumptions related to quality of character, personal worth, and intelligence.

Finley (2003) explained that those experiencing homelessness are often “criminalized and pathologized” in American society (also see Billington, 2011; Cronley, 2010; Finley & Diversi, 2010). Assumptions about this population’s literacy practices are particularly distorted and underestimated (Jacobs, 2014, MacGillivray, 2009; MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2010; MacGillivray, Curwen, & Ardell, 2012; Neale & Stevenson, 2015). For example, Jacobs (2014) found that a deficit was presumed even when the literacy practices of families in homeless shelters were consistent with their peers with permanent housing. One way to

disrupt these narratives is to examine the talk of New Beginnings' residents during book club to highlight their agency in creating a repertoire of cultural practices (Rogoff, 2003). For this study, we drew upon sociocultural theory, which provides an opportunity to explore perspectives and voices in a specific setting such as a recovery program, that shape individual and collective beliefs, attitudes, values, and aspirations (Rogoff, 2003; Rueda, 2011).

### Related Literature

#### A Marginalized Status

Homelessness is multidimensional and storied (Somerville, 2013). Despite a constellation of macroeconomic and social factors including loss of employment, unaffordable housing, substance abuse, violence, and trauma that may instigate economic crisis (Finley & Diversi, 2010), homeless people are often negatively stereotyped (Billington, 2011; Cronley, 2010; Jacobs, 2014) and blamed for poor choices (Finley & Barton, 2007). These perceptions are magnified for mothers who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. The tendrils of physical and emotional trauma, mental illness, homelessness, and substance abuse are interwoven with structural inequities (Finley & Diversi, 2010) making it difficult, at times, to tease out what practices and policies enacted by social and governmental forces and structures (i.e., rehabilitation, shelters, parenting classes, etc.) actually help or hinder recovery.

In spite of the complex and devastating impact of homelessness, institutions can nurture healing. Developing relationships can play a positive role for homeless people, whether living on the streets

(Fitzpatrick, 2017), in hostels (Neale & Stevenson, 2015), or in recovery programs (Holman, et al., 2018). For those in residential programs, non-traditional approaches (e.g., monitored alcohol programs) are increasingly recognized as important in creating “a milieu that can enact self-change” (Evans, Semogas, Smalley, & Lohfeld, 2015). Interdisciplinary work has captured the potential of book clubs to play a therapeutic role (Billington, 2011) and a purposeful context to re-establish self (Holman, et al., 2018).

#### Book Clubs as a Social Practice

There is a rich body of research that details the power of a book club to change participants' lives, enable close social connections, and provide for new

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perspectives on life (Billington, 2011; Childress & Friedkin, 2012; Long, 2003; Luttrell, 2008; Sweeney, 2008). Reading is a process that creates room for the reader to imagine a different life, new experiences, and reinterpret the past (Holman, et al., 2018; Sweeney, 2010).

Overall, the act of repositioning a solitary act of reading into a communal one is well documented to have a powerful impact on people's lives (Long, 2003; Rooney, 2005; Twomey, 2007).

Book clubs are also potential spaces for participants to negotiate identity, language, social class, and gender (Holman, et al., 2018; Luttrell, 2008). The collective conversation provides readers with an opportunity to come to richer understandings of a particular text (Beach & Yussen, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). Especially for women who are marginalized and/or oppressed, book club conversations can create a space to relate to characters in books as well as to other participants (Holman, et al., 2018).

A few studies have examined book clubs occurring in restrictive settings such as prisons and residential recovery programs. Billington (2011) examined small groups of prisoners who met with a mental health professional to discuss shared text. Across several sites, she found discussions of literature helped, “to ‘find’ a more multidimensional person than might readily be realized in a captive environment, and aids in opening up new possibilities for the self” (p. 73). In another study, the researcher explored how incarcerated women found that reading and talking about reading allowed for “reenvisioning and rescripting” of lives (Sweeney, 2010, p. 3). Book discussions supported thinking beyond “rigid categorisation by which collective systems of health or imprisonment necessarily organise and codify human experience and mentality, by offering richer, broader, and more complex paradigms” (Billington, 2011, p. 77) thus creating a space for agency rarely afforded in restricted settings.

The theory of social literacy practices framed one of our own studies (MacGillivray, et al., 2012) in which we looked broadly at reading practices at New Beginnings and found reading for pleasure offered residents “fresh air,” “solace,” and a sense of accomplishment unrelated to their recovery process. The participants’ collective knowledge served as a resource with which to understand, interpret, and address their past, present and future lives. In a second study (Holman, et al., 2018), we examined the content of book club discussions as a place that might facilitate increased trust and vulnerability. We drew upon Cultural Relational Theory (Duffey & Haberstroh, 2014, Duffey & Somody, 2011), an emerging theory in clinical mental health counseling, and found that book club interactions increased a sense of psychological safety and developed interpersonal interactions. Overall, book club’s pleasure reading and subsequent discussions were critical to improving the quality of life especially within a restrictive environment that is

dedicated to self-reflection and personal transformation. This current study builds on these previous works by investigating the way members adapted the social practices within a specific literacy event (Barton, 2007) of discussing books to inform their overall interpersonal relationships.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, we drew upon sociocultural theory which provides an opportunity to explore perspectives and voices in a specific setting, such as a recovery program, that shape individual and collective beliefs, attitudes, values, and aspirations (Rogoff, 2003) and how these practices evolve in response to place, time, and challenges of circumstances (Rueda, 2011). Within that framework, we drew upon a literacy as a social practice which focuses on cultural literacy practices embedded in local contexts (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Perry, 2012; Street, 2001) that people draw upon in particular interactions called literacy events (Barton, 2001; 2007). These literacy events, or day-to-day happenings around text, are made up of a series of social exchanges that guide current practices and are informed by past actions (Barton, 2007). Interpersonal relationships and community understandings can be foregrounded using this theory (Perry, 2012).

When analyzing a literacy event like a book club held in a recovery setting, it is important to think about it in terms of social, psychological, and historical dimensions. These three orientations are interconnected and informed by personal and cultural experiences (Barton, 2007). Specifically, literacy as a social practice enables us to consider the ways in which book club participants drew upon and/or developed practices influenced by their personal backgrounds and brought those understandings to the group. It allowed us to see how the group constructed a collective

understanding of the meaning of this literacy event and how it then informed them both as individuals and as a group. Using the book club as the unit of analysis, this theoretical framework also afforded consideration of the shelter's role as an institution providing a space and support for this and other literacy events (Barton, 2007).

### Methodology

This study draws from a longitudinal qualitative case study at a residential treatment center for female, addicted, trauma survivors and their children. All participants individually consented to participate in the study. One individual declined, but then changed her mind after engaging in two book club sessions.

Laurie's, the first author, initial interactions with staff and families included formal interviews and informal participatory observations related to a larger study of the literacy practices of families in multiple homeless shelters. The New Beginnings' book club was started in response to the program director's request. Over the course of a three-and-a-half-year period, Laurie visited New Beginnings one to two times a week gathering data for this and two other studies: a family art and literacy community engagement research study (see Heise & MacGillivray, 2011; 2013) and an after-school tutoring program (MacGillivray & Goode, 2016). In order to speak with residents, their children, and staff, she often arrived early and stayed late at events. She became a member of the community with frequent invitations to celebrations, such as birthday parties, graduations, and holiday events.

Other research team members participated in varying degrees with data gathering, such as occasionally participating in book clubs and conducting interviews and focus groups. These interactions yielded data that informed our

understandings of the individual and shelter literacy practices. Developing the theoretical foundations, study design, and analysis for this paper was a collaboration by all authors.

### Setting

New Beginnings (this and all names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality) is a two-year faith-based transitional homeless shelter and rehabilitation program for mothers and their children. This shelter requires three criteria for entry into the program: a mother must have custody of at least one child under 12 years old, be homeless, and be addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Some residents are court-ordered to enroll in the program or else must go to jail. New Beginnings' staff often work with the courts to resolve criminal charges and to help residents regain custody of their children. The shelter had the capacity to house 11 mothers and their children at any one time.

The program was located in one hall of a multi-purpose building that supported New Beginnings. Women and their children were provided one room with a private bath and meals served in a cafeteria. The program required attending numerous, highly structured daily activities such as parenting classes and intense work with a case supervisor. The influence of Alcoholics Anonymous permeated the program. In fact, a poster of their 12-steps hung on the wall near the entrance. In daily interactions, residents and staff referred to the metaphor of "steps" as a series of specific actions to the lifelong process of recovery. The belief that total abstinence is essential to recovery and other concepts associated with 12-step programs peppered conversations about their recovery process, including words and phrases such as "addict," "making amends," "believing in a higher power," and "taking personal inventories." Prayers, Bible-sessions, and worship services were also integral to

life at New Beginnings. Residents were not required to be Christians, but many talked about scripture and God as important to their goal of living a sober life. We did not specifically address with study participants their comfort with Christianity and the way it permeated the life at New Beginnings.

Many of the program's sessions were held in the one communal space furnished with a couple of sofas, a few chairs, and a television. As residents progressed in the program, they were allowed to leave the site for other services and needs, such as GED classes, doctors' appointments, court dates, and eventually, weekend passes. Privileges such as going outside for a "smoke break" or talking on the phone were negotiated among staff and residents. At times, rule violations by other residents had consequences for all. For instance, when repeated warnings did not decrease the amount of trash in the outside smoking area, smoke breaks were suspended for a week. For the residents, the benefits of stable housing, prepared meals, and an array of psychological, social, and health services for up to two years often outweighed the disadvantages of institutional mandates. At times, individuals stated that the rules, in general, were parameters that helped in their recovery and at other times, there was talk about them being unnecessarily punitive. When women elected to leave without graduating, the program's rigidity was often cited as one of the reasons.

In terms of reading material, all residents were given AA texts and individual readings about sobriety, parenting, and overall health as requested or offered by staff. Bibles were typically available to new families. A small room housed a bookcase that contained donated books on a variety of topics,

some brand new and others yellowed with age. Most reading and writing was done exclusively by paper and pencil since only supervised computer time was allowed. Reading the Bible and recovery-related texts was taken as integral to "working" the program. All members of book club received their own copy of the selected texts.

### **New Beginnings' Book Club**

Book club was one of the few activities not explicitly related to recovery. Although book club attendance was mandatory per shelter rules, participation in the research was not. The facilitator stressed that not being in the study was fine and would not impact their role in the book club. Regardless of

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participation in the study, the degree to which one joined the discussion was optional. Even though we, as teachers and readers, value choice and would not have mandated attendance, we respected the institution's structure. Over time, we gained an understanding of how participation in book club

and other shelter activities was essential to creating new ways to act and interact as a sober person (MacGillivray, et al., 2016).

Laurie met weekly with the residents to discuss popular novels (see Appendix A for list). Book club was not focused on improving participants' reading skills (for a description of adult functional literacy instruction, see Perry, Shaw, Ivanyuk, & Tham, 2017). Instead, the New Beginnings' program director wanted the women "to feel as if they could be someone who is a member of a book club."

The book club facilitator (Laurie) was a literacy professor from a local university, not on staff at New

Beginnings. Her primary role was to encourage broad, engaging conversations in response to a shared text. Residents attended book club as soon as they began participating in shelter group activities (this was often a few weeks into the program, depending on the physical and mental health of her and her family members) and continued attending until they left or graduated. The group read more than 33 different books (see Appendix A for a complete list of books) over the three-and-a-half years. Participants selected the readings by consensus from titles brought in by the facilitator and recommendations by group members. Some popular books were read more than once; other books were not completed when members expressed a lack of interest in further reading. Sessions lasted approximately 35-60 minutes with informal talk before and after. At the end of each session, members decided how far to read for the next week. The reading pace was determined by interest in the book, its length, and other time demands on members such as taking care of their children during school vacations.

Most book club meetings followed a routine. They started with participants seated in a circle and sharing a sentence about their reaction to the book and/or what struck them. Most sessions consisted of authentic discussion of the text and their responses to it, as reflected in the laughter, re-readings and discussions of meaningful passages, overlapping talk, and the sharing of personal connections (MacGillivray, et al., 2012). When asked about what makes a particularly good book club session, participants cited they most valued hearing others' perspectives about a text (MacGillivray, et al., 2012).

The book club's composition changed as residents entered and exited the program. With each new arrival, newcomers were quickly greeted, briefed about the book club, and then discussion began. Most had heard about the book club prior to

attending and some even obtained books and started reading before their first meeting. The facilitator met individually with new residents to discuss the research and seek their informed consent. She shared her background as a classroom teacher and teacher educator. She discussed her interest in how families read while in homeless shelters and how the research project had potential to impact policies and programs in similar institutions. The emphasis was on her role as a facilitator who loved to read and talk about books and book club as a place for readers to come together and share without an explicit focus on recovery.

Group size varied from three to 11. At times, membership was steady with the same participants over an extended period; at other times there was more fluidity due to residents entering and exiting the program and schedule conflicts such as doctors' appointments for a member or a member's child. The number of times individuals attended the book club varied widely, from one time to as many as 67 book club sessions. Almost half of the members attended more than 30 times. (See Table 1, for more details on attendance.)

### **Participants**

Throughout the three-and-a-half years study, a total of 50 residents participated in the book club. All the participants had experienced multiple traumas including: neglect; physical, sexual, and mental abuse as children and adults; addiction to alcohol and/or drugs; incarceration; untreated long-term mental and physical illnesses; and growing up in and/or losing a child to the foster system. For the majority of the residents this was not their first recovery program. Since the program's criteria required legal documents identifying the potential residents as addicted to drugs and/or alcohol and homeless, and the strong presence of the Alcoholics

Table 1	
<i>Number of Sessions Attended by Participants</i>	
Total number of participants: 50	
<u>Participants</u>	<u>Range of Total Sessions Attended</u>
3 members	60-67
3 members	50- 59
5 members	40-49
6 members	30-39
6 members	20-29
9 members	11-19
9 members	2-9
9 members	1

Anonymous program, residents often referred to themselves as addicts.

Participants included 30 Black, 17 White, one Latina, and two individuals of multiple heritage backgrounds. They ranged in age from 21 to 48. All had children in their custody and most had their high school diplomas or High School Equivalency certificates. One had a professional license. The majority presented themselves as readers with varying degrees of practice: Some had not read for pleasure in a long time; others were avid readers; and a few shared that they became readers during incarceration. All but four individuals reported doing little reading when they were getting high and/or drinking except for engaging in literacy practices such as texting. Group members brought a range of individual experiences, interests, and perceptions of the world which contributed to rich discussions.

### Research Team

The research team was comprised of four members. We have all participated in voluntary book clubs at some point in our lives. The first and second author self-identify as White women and currently upper-middle class. The third author self-identifies as a Mexican-American woman and currently upper-middle class. The fourth author self-identifies as a White male and currently lower-middle class. None of us have personally experienced addiction or homelessness, although we all have family and/or friends who have. Our personal inexperience with addiction and living without a residence compelled us to listen deeply, engage in member checking, and ask frequent follow-up questions. Being mindful of the potential to perpetuate stereotypes, we also interrogated the way we selected examples to share in this article. The presentation of our findings is guided by our deep and profound respect for New Beginnings’ clients and staff.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Book club was a key component of this longitudinal case study of the literacy practices at New Beginnings (MacGillivray, et al., 2016). The book club met weekly, with breaks for special events, school holidays and vacations, for a total of 163 sessions. These included six sessions in which we reflected on the overall nature of the book club, discussed favorite books, and/or played word games. Due to limited research funds, 63 of the 163 sessions were professionally transcribed. The others were documented in field notes following each session.

Besides the book club sessions, data sources included interviews, focus groups, and field notes. For this paper, the authors reread through all of the interviews and field notes from the broader study using a sociocultural perspective that considered individuals' development as members of a community (Rogoff, 2003), specifically literacy as a social practice within that community (Barton, 2007).

We were struck that the presence of an active book club served social purposes in community interactions within and beyond book club sessions, such as the development of relationships and a sense of a reader identity (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Perry, 2012). Transcripts of 19 interviews and seven focus groups and field notes were the initial data sources for this paper. Although some of the formal interviews focused on different aspects of literacy practices at New Beginnings, book club was often referenced. Through individual and group sorting (Saldaña, 2016) of the functions of literacy social practices (Barton, 2007), we found three themes: individual identity as reader, a sense of belonging,

and a sense of normalcy. To enrich the data pool, one researcher analyzed all 63 transcripts of book club sessions. To locate instances when members referenced during group sessions, there was an initial word search for "book club" then "reading" and then simply "book." As is critical with case studies, multiple sources of evidence created a convergence of data, all serving to inform the findings as related to the three themes (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). Together, the book club sessions, field notes, interviews, and focus groups reflect the "bulk and complexity" (Bryman & Burgess, 1994, p. 216) necessary to create a rich analysis.

## Findings

**"We found primary social functions of the book club as developing: 1) a reading identity through the habit of reading and discussing books, 2) a sense of belonging to a book club, and 3) a sense of normalcy."**

In exploring the social functions of a book club in a restricted setting, we discovered that even though residents of New Beginnings were required to attend, the nature of their discussions determined the book club's impact on their lives. We foregrounded social, psychological and historical dynamics (Barton, 2007) to focus on participants' engagement and ways they integrated book club into their lives during this intense time of rehabilitation and self-reflection. We found primary social functions of the book club as developing: 1) a reading identity through the habit of reading and discussing books, 2) a sense of belonging to a book club, and 3) a sense of normalcy.

### Developing a reading identity through reading and discussing books

Even though most participants did not enter the shelter/recovery program with an active personal

reading practice (due to disinterest and/or being in the throes of addiction), many used book club to (re)ignite their reading practice. They shared that attending book club each week encouraged them to get “in the habit” of reading regularly. One participant shared excitedly, “I haven’t read this many books ever since I was in school.” Members looked forward to book club and shared this anticipation with others; one reported on her peer’s enthusiasm saying, “Ayla has been looking so forward to book club. It’s the first thing she said this morning.” Some admitted staying up late reading because they were so engrossed in their book. Reading and talking about literature became more prominent and a part of their social life at New Beginnings (Barton, 2007).

Participants talked about the enjoyment they found in reading, reflecting an orientation of reading for personal benefit (Barton, 2007). In one book club session, when reading *Mama Makes Up Her Mind: And Other Dangers of Southern Living* by Bailey White (2009), Diana shared,

Well, I just love this book, you know. It keeps me laughing. Keeps me, you know, keeps my mind off of other stuff, you know, I be going through...You know, you can be healing from laughing, so I just love this book. I really do.

By sharing her joy, she emphasized reading as a delightful, captivating activity. Her enthusiasm encouraged others to try reading the book and modeled one way to express their strong feelings for a text. They often reported that hearing others laughing while reading, motivated them to read. Members also shared Diana’s claim that reading was a way to redirect her focus, by sharing the pleasure they found in “escaping” into a good book.

Many members referred to reading for book club as “me time,” including it as a practice that contributed to self-care and self-improvement (Barton, 2007). Portia reported the satisfaction she found in the nightly ritual of reading in a hot bath after her daughter went to sleep. Others remarked that seeing a peer reading a book in the communal room was a reminder that reading could be a preferred way to spend time. Jennifer believed that the habit of reading could be used “as a way to maintain sobriety.” One participant contended that reading could, “Open up another pathway in your mind to see opportunities and things.” The talk about the benefits of reading was critical to the development of an individual reading identity that was part of a larger communal act in this shelter (Barton, 2007).

Book club encouraged residents to share with one another about what they were reading. Lisa described an awareness of the insights gained, “What struck me, until we really got to talking about it and stuff, I didn’t realize it, [but the book] that is kind of sad in a lot, a lot of ways, and in little subtle ways.” Her peer Hannah followed by emphasizing how conversation increased her appreciation of a text, saying, “When we start talking about this, I like the book a lot more than when I’m just sitting there reading it. And you start talking about it and bringing back memories, you know, I like it a lot more.” Both members recognized the way discussions enriched their individual readings of texts and brought a collective understanding to the group. Social interactions enhanced the meaning underlying the literacy event of reading a text (Barton, 2007).

The members extended the talk about books to family and other non-shelter individuals. For example, they reported how good it was to have other topics to discuss besides recovery when family visited. Books eased Monica’s connection with her estranged son. She explained, “I told him I had a

book for him [her son] to read and, at the exact same time, he said, ‘*Hunger Games*.’ We talked all about it. He even asked me to the movies. He usually doesn’t want to be around me.” This kind of tension was not unusual. Sometimes visitations with children who were not in their custody could be stressful in part because no one was allowed to go outside and there was a lack of privacy within the shelter. When Cinnamon invited her older daughter to participate in a book club session during a visit, it offered an engaging activity they could do together. In addition, Cinnamon’s daughter was able to see her mother be an animated, contributing member of a book club. In this context, conversation surrounding books gained a larger social role acting to mend damaged relationships. Presenting one’s self as a reader countered residents’ own and others’ narrow perceptions of them as simply addicts, and instead (re)constructed new, broader identities (Barton, 2007).

Book club members also nurtured each other’s ability to engage with others. During a discussion of *Black Girl Lost* by David Goines (2008), several women encouraged one of their peers, Denise, to elaborate on her reason for disliking the book. Wilma initiated an inquiry explaining her interest in hearing more about Denise’s thinking processes:

Wilma: Since you read a lot I’d be very curious if you have any idea why this turned you off ‘cause I’m certainly turned off sometimes and I’m curious.

Sylvia: Yeah. Why? Because he’s talking about heroin and stuff? Why?

Laurie: Denise, please talk to us.

Lynda: You think that’s it? Cause when I was reading it when it was descriptive of the drug I was like, “Huh. Yeah. I remember that.”

Laurie: So, when you said you didn’t like it I kind of wondered that.

Ayla: Yeah. Why don’t you like it?

Laurie: Like did you believe that it was too close to home or something?

Sylvia: Yeah.

Lynda: No, it was just like a seductive element of the drug it reminded me of, I guess.

Sylvia: Why didn’t you like it, Denise?

Denise: I just don’t like it.

Book club members offered possible reasons for not enjoying the book as they voiced their desire to hear from Denise. This exchange allowed for the group to generate possibilities for a reader to connect and respond to a book. Reading and talking about texts encouraged habitual reading and offered ways to talk about the world and one’s self with others (Barton, 2007).

### **Developing a sense of belonging to a book club**

One day, when Cinnamon declared, “I feel like I belong to something,” her words prompted many of New Beginnings’ book club members to nod in agreement. Following up on this remark, Laurie asked the group to generate a list of their book club’s characteristics, and they commented, “We laugh. We all get involved. We are open. We talk about what stuck out. We’re like Oprah’s book club. We’re sitting around sharing, socializing, comparing our lives to books.” On another occasion, Cowana reflected, “The book club is really about—I think—respecting everybody’s opinions. There’s going to be some disagreements, but we have a positive way of sharing our opinions. And I think that everybody

has a voice.” These thoughts reflect members’ attention to a rich pallet of the group’s exchanges, which were co-constructed in this specific context (Perry, 2012).

Levels of individual involvement varied within and across each session. Laurie let participants know, “The staff requires you to attend book club, but participation is optional.” The facilitator’s stance created a space for a variety of ways to “attend.” Although most members looked interested and engaged during book club, it was not unusual to have someone who was sleeping, reading, writing, and even in one session, crying in the corner. Those who were actively engaged in discussion mostly ignored these behaviors, with an occasional nudge to wake up someone sitting next to them. Through conversations with the participants and staff and analysis of field notes, we came to understand these behaviors were likely coping strategies. In this particular sociocultural context (Rueda, 2011), participation was intertwined with physical upheaval and/or deep emotional turmoil.

The members of the book club created a sense of accountability within the community (Rogoff, 2003). Members’ spontaneous apologies about not having completed the readings reflected the shared notion that when one was not prepared, it affected the overall quality of the session. Other expectations were also tacit and negotiated. For instance, one resident, Ayla, was furious when she realized her peer, Hannah, had read beyond the agreed upon chapters for that week and declared:

Ayla: I don’t even want to read the book.

Hannah: It’s so good you don’t want to stop...

Ayla: Just let us know what’s coming ahead. Just...

Hannah: I’ll tell you all about the stories you haven’t read yet (laughing).

Ayla: Do it and see if I get a chance to kill you (inaudible)

Laurie: Okay, wait. So, Ayla, why does it make you not want to read the book?

Ayla: Because...

Lisa: She ruined it.

Ayla: ...she ruined it.

**“In this particular sociocultural context (Rueda, 2011), participation was intertwined with physical upheaval and/or deep emotional turmoil.”**

Laurie: Because she told us about it?

Ayla: She has ruined it. Just the thought that she knows.

Ayla’s reactions and Lisa’s interjection reflect their investment in the norms

associated with the book club. Even though Hannah had not shared any of the future events of the story, she threatened an aspect of book club that Ayla valued. This might have been because she disrupted the communal process of making sense of the literature together. Or Ayla may have disliked the prospect that Hannah held the power to judge her peers’ responses and/or might share an unwanted hint regarding future events. The book club’s routines had been built with shared understandings, attitudes, and values (Barton, 2007). These routines provided stability and consistency and breaking them could evoke a strong emotional response.

Even with the book club’s established norms and routines, for some newcomers, membership felt

unattainable for other reasons. Chastity reported feeling uncomfortable initially in book club. During an interview, she revealed her early feelings, admitting:

I never thought that I would be enjoying book club. I already knew off the top from the first time I came that, “This is nothing I wanted to participate in. I ain’t been nowhere, I ain’t read no books. My vocabulary is the *Cat in the Hat*. It’s hard for me to remember stuff. I ain’t going to be able to.” Those are things that are going on in my mind.

But her feelings of alienation and self-doubt did not prevent Chastity from attempting to be a member. After a couple of sessions, she proclaimed, “I do fit in this group. I can do this. I’m just like them. They’re just like me.” Feeling like part of this reading group was important to Chastity. She realized how much she had in common with her peers and recognized her ability to be a contributing member, reflecting the sociocultural notion that personal histories around literacy can be constructed over time (Barton, 2007).

The nature of the book club rested upon the women’s collective agency. During a focus group, Cinnamon described book club as,

Just time for us to bond with each other...it’s just like our own little world and it’s how we make it. It’s how we make it ‘cause I love to read especially if I’m interested in the book and it’s just like the time takes us away from the children and being here just us.

Cinnamon’s insight, “It’s how we make it...” recognized their shared role in creating meaning. In another instance, one participant referred to the

caring atmosphere they had fostered in book club avowing,

I feel like in a way it’s teaching us to respect each other and respect each other’s opinion...We all read the books, and we all enjoy them, and have different opinions about them. It opens up our mind to look at how others think and feel about certain stuff.

In book club, the readers valued learning from one another and viewed that as one attribute of belonging (Barton, 2007).

### **Developing a sense of normalcy**

Membership in the book club was especially important in this shelter’s environment where residents followed strict rules and rigorous schedules that were integral to the design of the program. Being in recovery drove most meetings, Victoria explained, “We talk about treating your addiction 98% of the time. But we come in here [to book club] and we’re able to kick back and let our hair down—just be human...and not be censored. It just feels normal.” Cut off from family, friends, and society in general, residents used the book club as a space to be someone other than an addict. Even though they typically met in the same small community room where the women sat for several hours every day, Victoria described a different physicality during the time and space of book club. Reclining and relaxing she connected to being “human” and to be someone other than a recovering addict. The literacy practice of gathering to discuss books supported this alternative way of seeing herself (Barton, 2007). There was an emphasis on the freedom from “being judged.” This freedom to “be human” seems closely intertwined with a reprieve from staff oversight. In the shelter’s restrictive environment, the practice of constructing

book discussions was particularly complex and powerful.

The book club offered a counterpoint to the overall program's focus on sobriety by using popular novels as a starting point for discussions. As Portia explained, "Here we feel normal. This is the way normal people live. I mean, this is a normal thing people do. The only thing is we just don't have a cup of tea or coffee in our hand—or a donut." Cinnamon contrasted this sense of feeling normal with her experience in another shelter-based activity lead by a non-staff member by explaining, it was really about "him [the leader] telling you about how you was an addict." In an interview Ayla talked about the value of reading varied texts unrelated to recovery,

That's nice because you get a break from—it's a break from reality because, you know, you get something to read for enjoyment. Yeah, it's good that I'm working on myself and, yeah, you know, I need this, but it's nice to be able to have something to balance it out.

She confirmed that she believes recovery work is "good" but book club fulfilled another purpose. The space offered women a way to be a community of readers rather than a community of addicts. One member explained, "While we're here most of the day it's recovery, recovery, recovery, recovery and there's nothing wrong with that. That's why we're here. But we're human. We need some human contact in our life and this is where we find it: reading our book." Literature-based discussions bound the residents together as capable people (cf. Sweeney, 2010).

The accountability associated with support groups and 12-step programs was not an aspect of book club. One day as members were introducing themselves, a new resident defaulted into the 12-step

discourse of, "My name is .... and I'm an alcoholic/addict. My drug of choice was...." Others immediately jumped in saying, "We don't do that in here." At another point a member described the atmosphere of book club in contrast to other facets of New Beginnings,

You can relax in here. That's why in here I feel like you don't have to worry. 'Oh Lord! I'm going to have to write a paper on this.' You don't have to be nervous about every little statement you make.

Another resident, Robin explained:

It's more like something to do that's not really recovery based. It's kind of therapeutic in the way you can express yourself, what you think, how you relate to the book. If anything, it's not real controlled. You don't have to edit really what you think or say. It's more I feel like I can come here, and I don't have to worry what they're going to say or do. It's my one thing that doesn't have anything to do really with the process out there.

Robin captures the way book club was an opportunity to speak more freely and still resonant with the ability for expression learned in other therapy situations. Feeling "normal" was about having an opportunity to talk and act as someone other than an addict. In this way, the book club was defined by its members as a literacy practice through its social history (Barton, 2007) created through their conversations and implicit and explicit norms (Perry, 2012). It also had a purpose distinct from other shelter text-based practices.

### Discussion

In this study, we drew upon sociocultural theory, specifically literacy as a social practice, to analyze

the social functions of a book club situated within a restricted setting of a residential treatment program within a homeless shelter. The discussion considers this book club in relation to: 1) others held in restrictive and non-restrictive settings, 2) the establishment of a sense of community; and 3) a sense of normalcy and agency.

First, this study supports the research on the potential of book clubs to encourage reading and build relationships (Billington, 2011; Childress & Friedkin, 2012; Holman, et al., 2018; Long, 2003; Luttrell, 2008; Sweeney, 2008). Members created a generative space modeling reader-like behaviors, investing in conversations about books, and encouraging their peers to articulate the reasons for their own reactions. Even when book club members did not have the freedom to determine who attends nor meeting frequency, they still found pleasure in discussing shared texts. Books served as vehicle for maintaining and even healing relationships during interactions with family.

These practices demonstrated that being a reader is not reserved for a particular group with certain values and/or schooling experiences. Barton (2007) asserts that literacy practices are linked to social relations and contexts influenced by cultural and personal histories and mindsets. The women's ability to be in such a robust and engaged book club offers a counter narrative to the negative assumptions about marginalized populations, especially those addicted to drugs and surviving without stable housing (Billington, 2011; Cronley, 2010; Jacobs, 2014).

Second, the weekly book club offered a sense of community. The significance of feeling like a member is well-documented in book club research (Childress & Friedkin, 2012; Luttrell, 2008; Rooney,

2005). However, we can increase the understanding of the concept of "membership" by framing literacy as a social practice (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 2001; Street, 2001) within a larger sociocultural theory (Rueda, 2011). This lens highlights membership in New Beginnings' book club as situated in an intimate and structured long-term residency treatment program. Chastity's extreme shift from initially thinking, "I ain't going to be able to [participate in book club]" to later, "I do fit in this group" reflects the intensity of the context and how engagement in literacy practices has potential to transform an individual's sense of self (cf. Winn, 2011).

In another quote, Cinnamon's description of book club as "our own little world and it's how we make it" captures participants' sense of their collective

**"Books served as vehicle for maintaining and even healing relationships during interactions with family."**

power which is particularly important in environments in which even one's movement is restricted. This sense of community can play a pivotal motivator in becoming and staying sober (Evans, et al.,

2015; Holman, et al., 2018). As Portia was knocking on doors eager to hear others' thoughts and in turn gauge her own, she was using their close proximity and the attention to self-reflection to build a particular community of readers. These insights reveal the complexity of membership in literacy practices, such as book clubs, as influenced by individual, social, and historical experiences (Barton, 2007).

Third, in the restrictive environment of New Beginnings, the book club served a purpose that is typically not a feature of other book clubs in non-restrictive settings. That is, in this shelter setting for recovering addicts, women constructed a sense of normalcy and claimed an opportunity for agency. They negotiated and engaged within the book club

structure to create a space that was different than the other program activities. As they talked about books, shared their insights, and listened to each other, residents created a place where they captured a sense of normalcy, humanity, and awareness of others. These aspects have rarely been highlighted in previous research (Childress & Friedkin, 2012; Long, 2003; for exception see Holman, et al., 2018; Sweeney, 2010).

The institution's intended purpose was to support residents' ability to stay sober, be good parents, and become fiscally independent through highly structured and tightly scheduled daily activities. As women contrasted book club to other shelter literacy practices, it was clear that it added another dimension to their institutional experience. Through their participation in book club, members nurtured social literacy practices that extended the sessions beyond their physical and temporal boundaries. Their attitudes and values about text (Barton, 2007; Perry, 2012) were broadened to conceive of literature and literacy as *informing* their past and current experiences and future selves (Long, 2003; Lutrell, 2008) and not merely as a way of *reforming* their lives. It framed the content and nature of their interactions as other than addiction-related to allow for a broader focus on personal reflection and interpersonal development (cf. Holman, et al., 2018). As Evans, et al. (2015) assert, the spaces that are less restrictive in treatment programs allow residents to frame themselves as more than their "needs" as defined by an institution. As they built on one another's ideas, encouraged peers to share their thoughts, and developed shared understandings, the participants created a space for generative discussions about books and life, allowing book club to serve as a complementary resource for their community.

## Conclusion

The New Beginnings' book club members, by coming prepared, sharing their enthusiasm for reading, and participating in rich conversations, created a social practice (Barton, 2007; Perry, 2012) which valued reading and reflective discussions. This research leads us to reexamine assumptions about literacy practices like book clubs to meet the often-unrecognized needs of individuals and communities in restrictive environments. We also wonder about the ways we, as practitioners, can create more spaces that can be open-ended and agentive in specific contexts.

This study captures the way book clubs can have positive social value, with particular significance to populations that have been marginalized (Billington, 2011; Holman, et al., 2018; MacGillivray, et al., 2012; Sweeney, 2010) and suggests the nuanced social ramifications for common literacy practices. It documents the serendipitous social functions that can grow out of a community's needs at a particular time in a particular space.

## Implications for Future Research

Many research questions might extend from this study. These include: What would book clubs look like in other shelters, and would they hold similar values and purposes? and What are the restrictions in different spaces (such as prisons, hospitals, transient short-term shelters, emergency shelters for displaced individuals in natural disasters, refugee border camps, etc.) that constrain and/or offer different types of literacy experiences? Other research questions that might be explored in this setting include wonderings about the book club facilitator's role and relationship in terms of power and authority to the group, as well as the ways the book club's social practices intersect with other shelter practices. These and other similar inquiries

would provide additional insight about varied literacies and their meanings that exist within

people's lived experiences (Barton, 2007; Perry, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Author's Note: We would like to thank the book club members for their participation and New Beginnings' Director for having the insight to see the social potentials

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## Appendix A

### List of books read during the book club

- Ali, N., & Minoui, D. (2010). *I am Nujood, age 10 and divorced*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks.
- Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Random House.
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