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# Empathic reactions after reading: The role of genre, personal factors and affective responses



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of text genre (expository, life narrative, literary narrative), personal factors (trait empathy, personal experience, exposure to literature), and affective responses during reading (most relevantly: sympathy/empathy with the character) on two types of empathy: empathic understanding and pro-social behavior (donating). Participants ( $N=210$ ) read two texts within the same genre, about depression and grief, with one week between sessions. A genre effect was observed for pro-social behavior in the case of depression, with more people donating in the life narrative condition. Personal experience predicted empathic understanding and prosocial behavior for depression, but not for grief. Empathic understanding was further predicted by trait empathy, exposure to literature, and sympathy/empathy with the character. These results demonstrate the relevance of looking at readers' personal characteristics and suggest a repeated exposure effect of literature on empathic understanding.

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## 1. Introduction

Empathy, “the notion of responsivity to the experiences of another” (Davis, 1980), appears to have become the holy grail in theoretical and empirical investigations into the effects of reading literature (cf. Keen, 2007). Many scholars have suggested a relation between reading and empathic responses like compassion and increased understanding for others (e.g., Booth, 1988; Mar and Oatley, 2008;

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Nussbaum, 1995, 2001; Sontag, 2007; Pinker, 2011). This empathic function is attributed particularly to narratives about suffering. As Nussbaum stated in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001): “Tragic fictions promote extension of concern by linking the imagination powerfully to the adventures of the distant life in question” (p. 351). Thus, the argument goes that through empathizing with characters, we also learn to imagine how real-life others feel, consequently increasing our compassion.

Rhetorically, these claims by Nussbaum and others are convincing. To some extent, they are also backed up by empirical evidence showing a relation between reading stories and scores on empathy measures (e.g., Mar et al., 2006, 2009; Kidd and Castano, 2013). However, as will be explained below, these empirical studies have various issues. It is generally unclear which effects can be attributed to a text being “narrative” (i.e., characters undergoing a sequence of related events), “fictional” (as opposed to non-fictional) or “literary” (containing aesthetic and unconventional features). Moreover, some measures of empathy that are commonly used, like the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET, see Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) bear little relation to compassion and prosocial action in real-life. Studies using other measures of empathy than the RMET, like self-reported empathy, empathic attitudes or pro-social behavior, suggest a crucial role for personality variables and affective responses while reading (e.g., Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012, 2013).

Indeed, it is rather unlikely that any narrative text can increase empathy, compassion and pro-social behavior in just anyone (cf. Keen, 2007). What needs to be determined are the conditions for certain empathic effects to occur: who is affected by what kind of narrative text and why? The current article will provide a brief, selective overview of what is known regarding this issue, before presenting an experiment about empathic reactions to different genre conditions.

## 2. Theoretical and empirical background<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Defining empathy

When exploring the effects of reading narratives on empathy, it is first of all relevant to define “empathy.” “Empathy” and “sympathy” are often used interchangeably, which is not surprising, as “sympathy” referred to feeling someone else’s pain or joy before “empathy” was introduced in the English language (Keen, 2007; Titchener, 1909). Recently, scholars have pleaded to distinguish the two, with “empathy” designating the experience of feeling someone else’s feelings (“feeling with”), and “sympathy” designating the feeling of concern for another, without feeling what the other feels (“feeling for”) (e.g., Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009; Coplan, 2004; Mar et al., 2011). However, in practice this distinction may be difficult to make and is perhaps arbitrary, as these reactions are likely to co-occur (cf. Kuijpers, 2014).

A similar potentially fruitful distinction is that between the affective (or “warm”) and the cognitive (or “cold”) aspect of empathy (which could be likened to sympathy). As Davis (1980, 1983) has argued, “cognitive empathy” is the ability to understand someone else’s perspective (cf. “theory of mind”, or ToM: Leverage et al., 2011) and “emotional empathy” is about feeling similar emotions to someone else (cf. “emotional contagion”: Hatfield et al., 1994). This rather dualistic distinction, though theoretically useful, also poses problems. While providing neurological evidence that cognitive and emotional empathy are mediated by different brain structures, Shamay-Tsoory et al. (2009:625) emphasized that “every empathic response will evoke both components to some extent.” Likewise, Nathanson (2003) has argued for the interdependence of the affective and cognitive aspects of empathy. In this article I use the overarching term “empathic reactions” to designate a combination of affective and cognitive empathy. In addition, “empathic reactions” covers both empathic attitudes toward others (combining cognition and affect) and pro-social behavior (acting upon one’s sympathy/empathy).

Empathic reactions can be triggered by real people, but also by characters. This second type of empathic response can be called “narrative empathy” (after Keen, 2007), and is part of the broader concept “narrative feelings” (see Kneepkens and Zwaan, 1994; Miall and Kuiken, 2002), which consists of all feelings toward the narrative world, including empathy and sympathy with characters,

<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive theoretical exploration of the issues discussed in this section, see Koopman and Hakemulder (2015).

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