

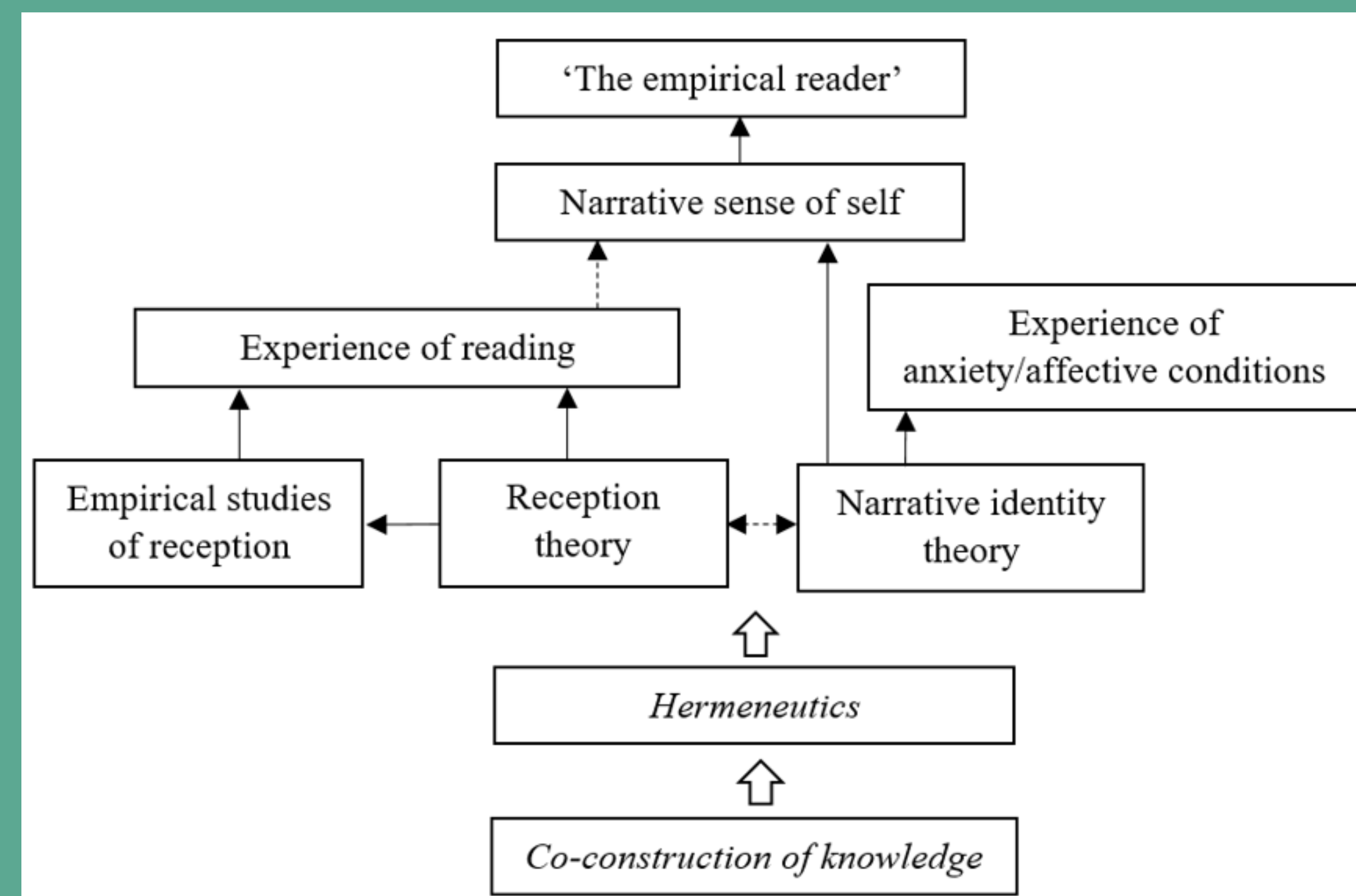
# Narrative Identity and the Empirical Reader

## A qualitative study into reading and mental health in Australia

PhD project, work in progress.  
This poster presented at the IGEL Conference, 2023.

### A triangulated theoretical basis: Reception and narrative identity

- This project remains primarily grounded in reception theory (as opposed to sociology or psychology) and benefits from rich existing theory in reception, particularly reader-response and empirical studies of reception.
- It also benefits from the insights of narrative identity theory, a domain deriving from narrative psychology and micro-sociology that postulates the narratively driven quality of identity formation.
- This triangulated theoretical basis draws together 'overlapping' elements within both domains, a relationship as yet unexplored.



[ABOVE: Theoretical framework. Dashed lines represent underexplored connections also to be addressed in this thesis.]

### Significance and projected outcomes

- This project endeavours to respond to the call for more empirical research into real readers beyond theoretical constructions. It considers underexplored yet potentially rich relationships between reception and narrative identity theory.
- The methodology provides a platform for everyday Australian readers to confidently share their passion for reading: participants are able to make their own contribution to interdisciplinary discussions on Australian literary culture and mental well-being.
- The outcomes of this project not only serve to augment reception scholarship, but could also help inform readers, writers, literary agencies, health providers, and government bodies as to the importance of reading to the mental health and identities of Australians.



What is the perceived significance of the leisure reading of fiction for the identities of Australian readers who experience symptoms of anxiety or affective disorders?

How does answering this, through an empirical 'life narrative of reading' approach, inflect accounts within reception studies of reading and hermeneutics?

### Introduction

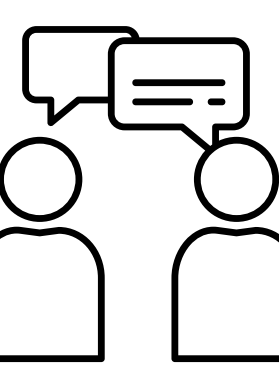
Scholarly conversation on the relationship between reading and mental health remains largely restricted to psychology, and understandably so. However, it is equally justifiable for literary theorists (particularly reception theorists) to make their unique contributions to this conversation. The predominance of the psychological perspective risks reading becoming tied up with experimental psychology, and with an instrumentalist understanding of literature. Literary theorists are in a position to complement and critique such a perspective by shifting the focus back towards readers qua readers, and towards reading as hermeneutic and aesthetic-cultural practice rather than pure cognitive act.

### Why this particular project?

Three separate but related claims within the existing scholarship on reception studies, narrative identity, and psychology have provided a basis for my inquiry:

1. Individuals construe themselves narratively (McAdams, 1995; Ricoeur, 2008/1990);
2. Anxiety and affective conditions disrupt the narrative sense of self (Austin, 2011);
3. Reading fiction can aid the formulation or reconstitution of the self (Hakemulder, 2000; Felski, 2008; Burke, 2011).

### Towards a 'life narrative of reading' methodology



My methodology is based upon qualitative naturalistic research principles, its goal to hermeneutically consider the experience of reading to everyday lay readers. Rather than assigning texts—whether as extracts as in the experimentalist paradigm, or as whole novels—my 'life narrative of reading' shifts the focus of enquiry towards the consideration of the reader as a reader, rather than as a respondent to discrete set texts. In other words, what I am interested in is the relationship, developed as it is over the course of time, that readers have with their reading, and with their self-reported identities as readers.

**The individual semi-structured interview is the primary method of this approach. Discussion covers such themes as reading and well-being, reading and life experience, and reading and identity formation. The joint construction of meaning between researcher and participant is emphasised. After collection and authentication, data is thematically analysed according to 'holistic-content' principles (Lieblich et al., 1998).**

Such a methodology draws from research methods found in both experimentalist and naturalistic studies into reception, as well as insights from bibliomemoir and cultural sociology.

Eligible participants:

- Are Australian residents aged 18 years or older,
- Have experienced the symptoms of anxious or affective conditions, whether diagnosed or not,
- Consider themselves regular readers of fiction.

Subjects are currently (**Aug 2023**) being sourced through voluntary response to advertisements. I have extended the possibility of participation beyond the urban university campus by soliciting participants from regional areas in New South Wales. However, demographic or other sociological considerations do not form the primary basis of analysis; rather, regional recruitment efforts mirror the exploratory and participatory interests of this project. Interviews will commence in **Sept 2023**.

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