Narrative Identity and the Empirical Reader

A qualitative study into reading and mental health in Australia

PhD project, work in progress.
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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.

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 experimental 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).

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.

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).

References


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