

Once upon a time in academia

Does shared reading of campus novels foster PhD candidates’ wellbeing?

Merel van Goch, Radboud University, The Netherlands

Problem: compromised well-being of PhD candidates

- Well-being and work enjoyment of PhD candidates are under pressure. Many PhD candidates experience **imposter feelings** [1]: fear of exposure of one’s intellectual or creative shortcomings, belief in one’s unsuitability for an academic position, the inability to internalize accomplishments, and the belief that others in one’s research and personal communities are blind to these apparent and disqualifying shortcomings [2].
- Imposter feelings are negatively correlated with **overall mental health** and positively correlated with anxiety and psychological distress. It is therefore important for individuals, academia and society to find solutions to this problem.
- This project explores a solution in the form of **reflection through literature**, and specifically literature about academia. Research has shown that reading for pleasure increases people’s well-being by helping them cope better with stress [3].

Potential solution: reflecting on campus novels

- **Literature helps us reflect** on ourselves and our lives [4].
- In the current project, we hypothesize that **campus novels** are particularly effective for such reflection, because these novels are often characterized by **dark humor and satire** [6; 7], and humor can help keep or create reflective distance from reality [8].
- Campus novels are set in and around college campuses and told from **the perspectives of faculty members or students**. Popular examples are Nabokov’s *Pnin*, Tartt’s *The Secret History* and Williams’ *Stoner*.
- To elicit reflection, we use the method **shared reading**: a literary activity in which a group reads and reflects on a text, with a “reader leader” guiding the conversation, which finds its success in **communal meaning-making processes** and collaboration [9; 10].

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How can reading and reflecting on campus novels relieve imposter feelings of PhD candidates?

Study I

- Study I aims to identify insights into the dynamics of reader responses for future successful implementations of the shared reading program targeting PhD candidates with the objective to positively affect their well-being in general and at work.
- A group of 5-8 PhD candidates reads and reflects on texts together, using the shared reading paradigm, guided by a reader leader, who invites participants to reflect at specific moments [9; 10; 12].
- We use the qualitative analysis method grounded theory to theorise about how fiction can relieve imposter feelings: what triggers an optimal psychological distance? What role might fictionality and humor play in this respect?

Study II

- Study II explores the effects of the shared reading sessions as an intervention, using a pretest-posttest design and quantitative methods.
- We measure participants’ perceived stress [13], imposter feelings [2], anxiety [14], and well-being at work [15] before and after the intervention.
- The intervention entails reading and reflecting on texts in groups of 5-8 PhD candidates, guided by a reader leader.
- Specific hypotheses and/or measures of Study II depend on the outcomes of Study I. A potential focus could be: how can the psychological distance to the reader’s self be optimised through humor? What is the relationship between different types of humor and the extent to which the reading experience determines a psychological distance from the events?

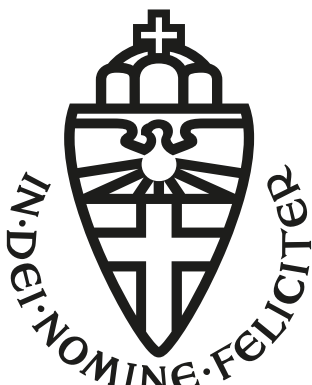
Popular examples of campus novels



© Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

References

1. Byrom, Dinu, Kirkman, & Hughes (2020): Predicting stress and mental well-being among doctoral researchers. Journal of Mental Health, DOI: 10.1080/09638237.2020.1818196.
2. Kolligan, & Sternberg (1991): Perceived fraudulence in young adults: Is there an 'imposter syndrome'? Journal of personality assessment, 56(2), 308-326.
3. Levine, S. L., Cherrier, S., Holding, A. C., & Koestner, R. (2022). For the love of reading: Recreational reading reduces psychological distress in college students and autonomous motivation is the key. Journal of American College Health, 70(1), 158-164.
4. Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Cornello, & Ewaldsen (2014). Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self: Motivations for Entering the Story World and Implications for Narrative Effects: Temporarily Expanded Boundaries of the Self. J. Commun. 64, 439-455.
5. Brokerhof, I. M., Bal, P. M., Jansen, P. G., & Solinger, O. N. (2018). Fictional Narratives and Identity Change: three pathways through which Stories influence the Dialogical Self. In Dialogical Self: inspirations, considerations and research (pp. 29-57). Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawla II.
6. Anderson, C.K., Chaddock, K.E. (2017). Humor in Academic Fiction: From Subtle Satire to LMAO. In: Tobolowsky, B., Reynolds, P. (eds) Anti-Intellectual Representations of American Colleges and Universities. Higher Education and Society. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
7. Womack, K. (2005). Academic Satire: The Campus Novel in Context. A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000, 326-339.
8. McGraw, A. P., Warren, C., Williams, L. E., & Leonard, B. (2012). Too close for comfort, or too far to care? Finding humor in distant tragedies and close mishaps. Psychological science, 23(10).
9. Billington, J. (2020). Reading and Mental Health. Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media.
10. Andersen, T. R. (2022). Regaining autonomy, competence, and relatedness: Experiences from two Shared Reading groups for people diagnosed with cancer. Frontiers in Psychology, 13.
11. Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York: Basic Books.
12. Davis, J. (2009). Enjoying and Enduring: Groups Reading Aloud for Wellbeing. Lancet 373, 714-715. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60426-8
13. Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. Journal of health and social behavior, 385-396.
14. Spielberger, C. D. (1983). State-trait anxiety inventory for adults.
15. Tennant, R., Hiller, L., Fisher, R., Platt, S., Joseph, S., Welch, S., ... & Stewart-Brown, S. (2007). The Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale (WEMWBS): development and UK validation. Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 5(1), 1-13.



CONTACT

Merel.vanGoch2@ru.nl