

# Implicit Measurements of Narrative Empathy

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# Narrative Empathy: Definition & Criticism

“[T]he **sharing of feeling** and **perspective-taking** induced by reading [...] narratives of another’s situation and condition.” (Keen, Living Handbook of Narratology)

“Keen criticizes accounts of narrative empathy that insist on **moral efficacy as an outcome of reading**, arguing that narrative empathy does not often lead to **documented altruistic action**.” (Keen, Living Handbook of Narratology)

- Which effects (“outcomes”) of narrative empathy can reasonably be expected and should therefore become the focus of research?
  - Which methods are suitable to research them?
- (Keeping in mind that empathizing, or failing to do so, can be a sensitive issue, and therefore prone to social desirability answering in certain contexts.)

# Narrative Empathy: Suggested Effects on Readers

Hypothesis: If readers empathise in the way described, this will influence (various) **reading outcomes**.

- Empathising Readers will be cognitively more involved in **(solving) protagonist's problems**.
- Empathising Readers will feel closer to the protagonists and thus display less **stereotypical biases** towards them (or members of their group), even if they belong to an outgroup.
- Empathising readers will **depict** protagonists (or members of their group) in a more individualizing manner, e. g. mentioning more of their thoughts and feelings.

➤ Next up:

Three research designs using *implicit* methods to address these hypotheses.

# Solving protagonist's problems

- Mask the whole experiment as a creativity task
- Ask participants to come up with as many ideas they can think of for different problems
- Let them read a narrative which deals with a protagonist in a situation related to one of these problems or a totally unrelated text
- After reading and also after two weeks: Ask them again for ideas on all problems
- **Hypothesis: Empathic readers come up with more ideas to the narrative-related problem**

# Less biased stereotypical expectancies

Studies on Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB) show that people tend to choose different types of sentences for describing actions by ingroup actors compared with outgroup actors – for the same action

- Mask the task as being about stylistic choices
- Introduce them to actors belonging to their ingroup and actors belonging to an outgroup (that will be represented by a protagonist in the text)
- Show them comic-like pictures of (positive and negative) actions by these actors
- Let them rate sentences describing this picture for accuracy of fit (LIB score before reading)
- Let them read a narrative.
- After reading and also after two weeks: Administer the comic picture test again (LIB score after reading)
- **Hypothesis: Empathic readers' show a decrease in Linguistic Intergroup Bias**

# Change in depiction

- Have participants read a text
- Mask the task as a creative writing exercise & ask them to write a story about a character from the same social group as the protagonist
- Code the material for
  - Emotion depictions
  - Thought depictions
  - Naming (or not naming) protagonists
  - Individualizing features
  - Explanations of characters' (bad) behaviour
- **Hypothesis: Empathic readers depict protagonists of their own stories in a more individualizing manner, focusing on "inner happenings"**

Example Material:  
LIB & Creative Writing Task



A leiht B den Hammer.  
(A lends the hammer to B.)

Descriptive  
Action Verb

A erweist B einen  
nachbarschaftlichen  
Gefallen.  
(A does B a neighborly  
favor.)

Interpretative  
Action Verb

A liegt eine gute  
Nachbarschaft mit B am  
Herzen.  
(It is important to A to be on  
good neighborly terms with  
B.)

State Verb

A ist hilfsbereit.  
(A is helpful.)

Adjective



# Task: Creative Writing



Please write a short story about the situation shown in the picture.

Your story should contain information on what happened before, during, and directly after the situation shown.

Your story should be intelligible to someone who has not seen the picture.



# Pros & Cons

## of implicit methods researching reading outcomes

- **Implicit**

Does not rely on direct self-disclosure of readers, less likely to be influenced by social desirability

- **Focus on Real-World-Effects of Reading:**

While narrative empathy with protagonists is by now a well-researched phenomenon, it is less clear, which (if any) effects empathic reading has in the “real world”

- **Time frame of effects can be studied**

Short-term or long-term effects?

- Relying on reading **outcomes**

Narrative empathy might not be (sole) cause of these effects

*Possible Mitigation:*

- Identify these other possible causes and try to control for them in your study.
- Use direct measures in conjunction with indirect measures.

- **New method(s)**

Always prone to flaws; the LIB however has been used in various contexts



Thanks for listening.

Comments, questions & critique most welcome!

If you are interested in the methods used or my study on “Effects of Reading Refugee Literature” (publication in 2022), don’t hesitate to get in touch:

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