How might moral evaluation limit narrative empathy?

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The limits of empathy during narrative reading
Interactive discussion event (24th March 2023)

Outline

- Defining narrative empathy

- Elements involved in narrative empathy

- Factors that can influence narrative empathy

- Case study: Empathising with a torturer?

- Discussion prompts

How might we define *narrative empathy?*

Narrative empathy involves a character-oriented emotional response and perspective taking. The reader forms a mental representation of the character's situation and mental state(s) while maintaining a self-other distinction. In this way, readers re-enact, simulate, or imaginatively experience in a first-person way what they perceive is the character's mental state and mental activity. The resulting response is congruent with the reader's perception and understanding of what the character's experience must be like. (Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2020, p. 125)

Based on Keen (2006, 2013), Coplan (2004, 2011a, 2011b), De Vignemont and Jacob (2012), Gallagher (2012), Caracciolo (2014), and Cuff et al. (2016)

What are the main elements involved in NE?

Empathy involves

- an *empathiser* (the observer who empathises with another) and
- a *target* (the object of empathy = that with whom one empathises).

Thus, narrative empathy involves

- The reader (as potential *empathiser*), who is the recipient of the textual stimuli.
    - Reader factors can influence how readers engage with the text.
- The character (as potential *target* of empathy), which is shaped by textual devices.
    - Textual linguistic factors can influence readers' interpretation and responses.

What textual factors can influence NE?

- A long list of factors has been associated with empathetic reading experiences

- Keen's (2007) theory of narrative empathy – see <u>pages 92-99</u> for a list

- For an overview of theoretical and empirical studies, see Fernandez-Quintanilla and Stradling (forthcoming)

  Introduction: Stylistic Approaches to Narrative Empathy (October 2023, *Journal of Literary Semantics*)

How might reader factors influence NE?

Empathy is highly context-dependent, and can be influenced by

- Trait/dispositional factors = how empathetic the person/reader is

- State/contextual factors = to do with the situation in which the target is situated

How might reader factors influence NE?

In any given scenario, empathy can result from

■ Automatic, bottom-up processes (i.e. stimulus driven – involves attention & perception)

■ Controlled, top-down processes (i.e. knowledge driven – involves appraisal of situation)
- attention
- the perspective adopted
- empathiser-target relationship
- contextual appraisal, including moral evaluation (i.e. information & assessment of character's situation + their emotions, experiences & actions *in that context*)

Fernandez-Quintanilla (2018: 86-101; 2020: 127-128)

How might moral evaluation limit NE?

■ Empathy is morally sensitive & is underpinned by moral judgements (Zillman 2006)

■ Aspects in target perception and evaluation:
  – (un)fairness perception (Singer et al 2006)
  – blame allocation (Cuff et al 2016)

= moral evaluation is a top-down process (because it is knowledge-driven, part of readers' experiential background) that can override the automatic nature of empathy

Case study: Empathising with a torturer?

- Empirical reader response / Empirical stylistics (Whiteley & Canning 2017)

- Qualitative data collection (focus group discussions) & data analysis (thematic)

- Participants: 9 Spanish focus-group participants in 2 groups (5+4)

- Textual stimulus: 3 unmodified short stories from Eduardo Galeano's *The Book of Embraces* in the original language (Spanish)

- *Professional Life* tells the story of an <u>unnamed torturer</u>, who works for the French colonisers of Algeria, <u>and Ahmadou Gherab</u>, who fought for the independence of Algeria. The story focuses on the <u>civil servant who tortured Ahmadou day after day for several months</u>. (Not in the story -- Ahmadou survived the torture)

Empathetic responses

Surprisingly, there was evidence of empathy in the case of 7 readers, who

- – Attributed to him certain circumstances, values and goals: *He is forced to do that job to survive; His wife and new-born baby need to be fed.*
- – Perceived a strong similarity with the real world: *People who have to put up with exploitative working conditions to feed their family and have no choice.*

■ None of these readers agreed with his behaviour (the practice of torturing people) -- '*alignment*', but not 'allegiance' (= ethical siding) (Bonasera, forthcoming)

■ But they <u>did not</u> blame the character and <u>did not</u> condemn the character on moral grounds.

= Empathy with morally complex characters is possible only when readers <u>withhold</u> their moral evaluation ('suspension of moral judgment' or 'moral disengagement' (De Jonge at al. 2022)

Non-empathetic responses

There was no evidence of empathy in the case of 2 readers who openly condemned the Torturer's behaviour:

- *There's no way to justify what doesn't have any type of humanity.*

- *There are people who have no scruples. There is always another option.*

- *Lack of feeling, selfishness, coldness, lack of empathy.*

These 2 readers disassociated themselves from the character on moral grounds

= A negative moral evaluation is very likely to block empathy

Conclusions

- My study suggests that empathy is a choice. It might be the case that we morally pre-approve those with whom we choose to empathise.

- Empathy with morally complex characters is possible when readers withhold/suspend their moral evaluation.

- But a negative moral evaluation is very likely to block empathy.

- We need further evidence on the role of moral evaluation in experiences of empathy.

- This is just a tiny piece of the whole puzzle of how narrative empathy works and how we empathise with characters. We still know very little about this!

Discussion prompts

- In your research, have you come across the link between empathy and morality? By whom/in which studies? Can you give details? (Add to the collective wisdom ☺)

- How might we do further research on the interplay between morality and empathy?

- Apart from morality, can you think of other reader factors that might get in the way?

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