# 'Breaking Bad': Fiction Reading and Morality Shifts

## 01 Morality shifts

A morality shift, as it is called here, is the moral evaluation of immoral conduct as something that is not immoral.

**Moral evaluation** is considered to be the combination of two components:
- Moral disengagement
- Moral judgement

If we **morally disengage**, we cognitively restructure immoral conduct into something negligible, or even worthy. We do this, among others, through justification, or diffusion or displacement of responsibility.

Moral judgement is the evaluation of a certain behaviour as good or bad, or as right or wrong. It is intentionally left as a broad concept. Literary characters, or fictional characters, are often labelled as good or bad. Heroes and villains.

## 02 Methodology

Three quantitative, online experiments were conducted. They all consisted of:
- An introduction with the manipulation
- A short story
- Attention/manipulation checks
- Questionnaire on quantitative variables
- Demographic questions

One qualitative study was conducted to explore moral evaluation in practice, among Shared Reading groups in Belgium. Data collected consists of:
- Shared Reading of a short story
- Focus group interviews immediately afterwards

## 03 Quantitative variables

Over the course of the three quantitative experiments, multiple variables were tested.

**Independent variables/Manipulations:**
- Fictionality (fiction vs. biography)
- Constructed morality (good vs. evil)

**Mediation variables:**
- Perceived (character) realism
- Moral disengagement
- Moral judgement

**Outcome variables:**
- Empathy
- Aesthetic appreciation

## 04 Quantitative analyses & results

The first experimental study shows that there is an indirect effect of fictionality on empathy, through moral disengagement ($B = 0.190$; 95% CI [0.005, 0.415]).

Presenting a story as fiction increases moral disengagement regarding the immoral conduct of the story’s protagonist – in turn this increased moral disengagement leads to higher levels of empathy for the protagonist.

The second experimental study shows a full mediation of character morality on aesthetic appreciation ($B = -0.485$; 95% CI [-.86, -.11]), mediated through moral judgement ($B = .301$; 95% CI [.14, .52]). Whenever the story character is judged as a morally better person, regardless of intended or constructed, moral disposition, this leads to a higher aesthetic appreciation.

The third experimental study shows that fictionality does not impact empathy, aesthetic appreciation, or any of the proposed mediating variables. The experiment does however show that both empathy and aesthetic evaluation are predicted by perceived realism and moral disengagement ($F(2, 244) = 2529.852$, $p < .001$).

High perceived realism leads to high moral disengagement, which in turn increases empathy and aesthetic appreciation.

## 05 A qualitative case

Qualitative analysis of the focus group interviews shows that reading a story and morally evaluating its characters is a highly personal experience. The reader quoted here conflates their own lived experiences with the experiences of the story character. This participant is defending a story character’s inaction in the face of immoral conduct of the character’s husband. The reader switches perspective between the character **themself**es, and **you**. One of the analytical questions to ask is: ‘Who is you?’

**QUOTE**

_The_ was brought up that way...

_In my case, I was in boarding school from 12 to 20, imprisoned, I had to listen, had a military regimen at home as well, had to listen._

_That then _ step into a marriage where _ also have to listen... Yes, you just don’t know any better. It’s just the consequence of your life. So then, am I responsible for that? No, I am a product of my time. I’m a product of the zeitgeist and I’ve grown out of that after years._

_But at that point, you can’t do otherwise._

## 06 Conclusion

If there is one thing that all four studies show, it is that there are **great differences between individuals’ acceptance of immoral behaviour**.

Moral evaluation seems to be at the heart of what drives people to empathise with characters displaying immoral conduct, and aesthetically appreciate the stories of those characters.

When we are **breaking** away from the molt of what is considered morally **bad**, we are more likely to enjoy the stories of characters displaying immoral conduct.

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**Published work**

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**Relevant literature:**

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