

'Breaking Bad': Fiction Reading and Morality Shifts

Author:

Julia de Jonge

Co-authors on research presented:

Massimo Salgaro, Elly Konijn, Frank Hakemulder, Simone Rebor, Serena Demichelis

Affiliations:

MSCA ELIT; Università di Verona, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Contact details:

j.de.jonge2@vu.nl

Questions? Use Whatsapp:



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**

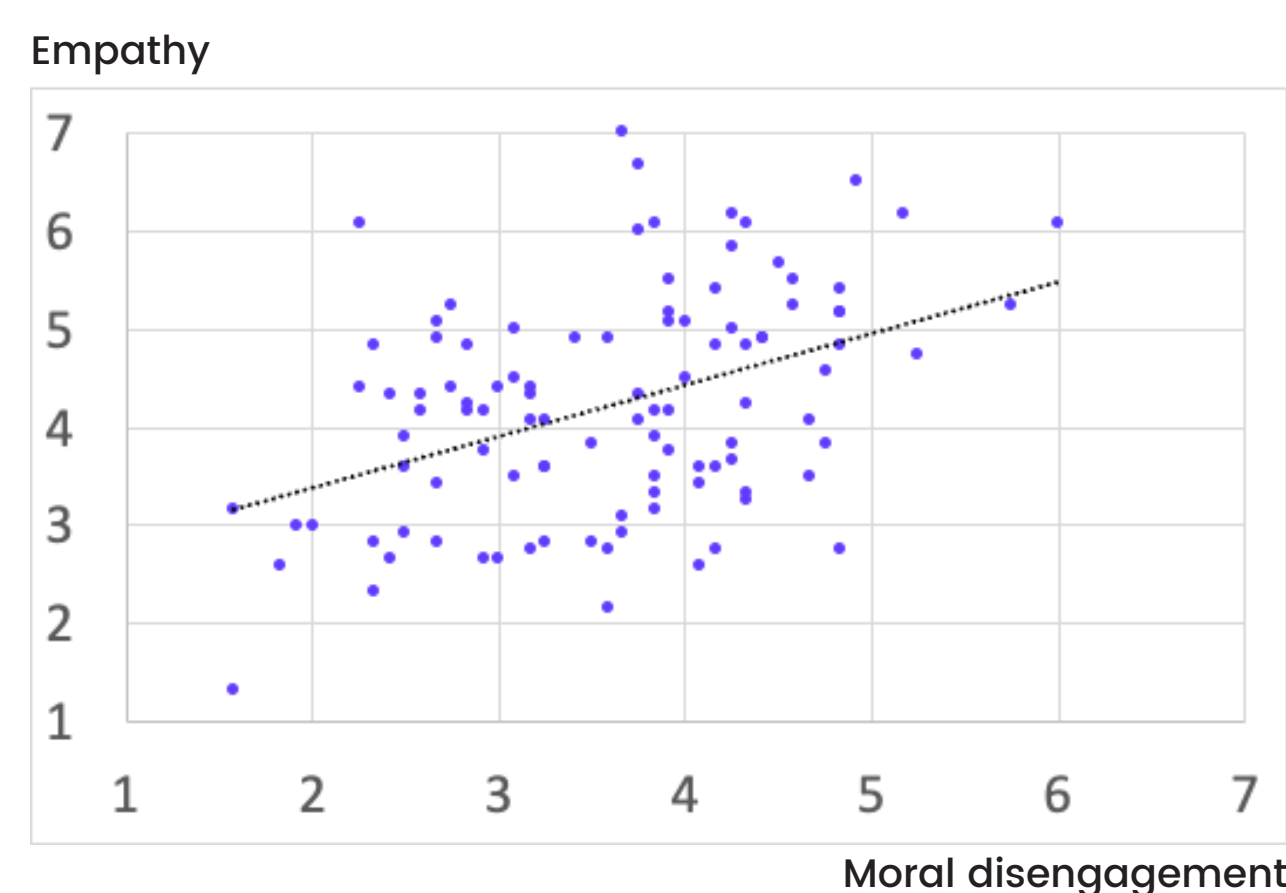
Outcome variables:

- **Empathy**
- **Aesthetic appreciation**

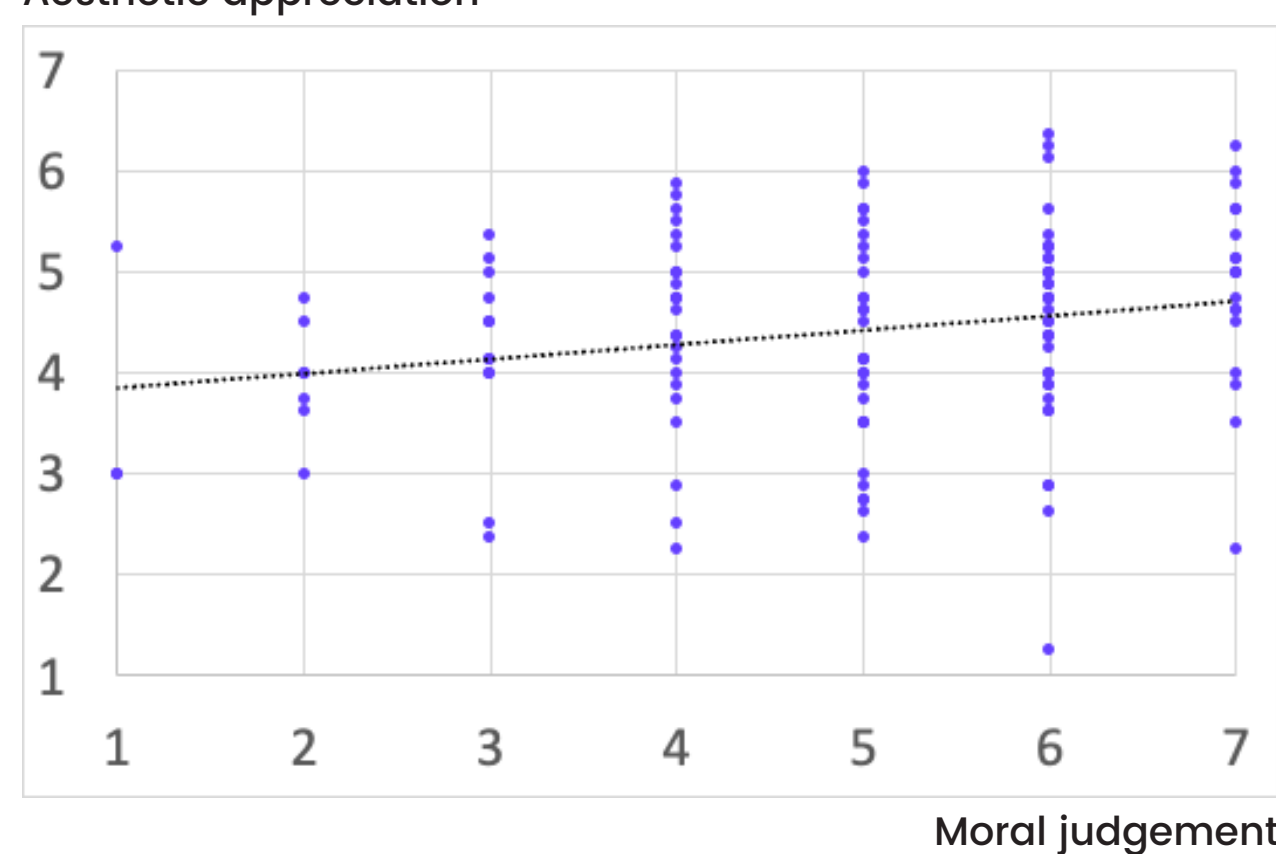
04 Quantitative analyses & results

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.



Aesthetic appreciation

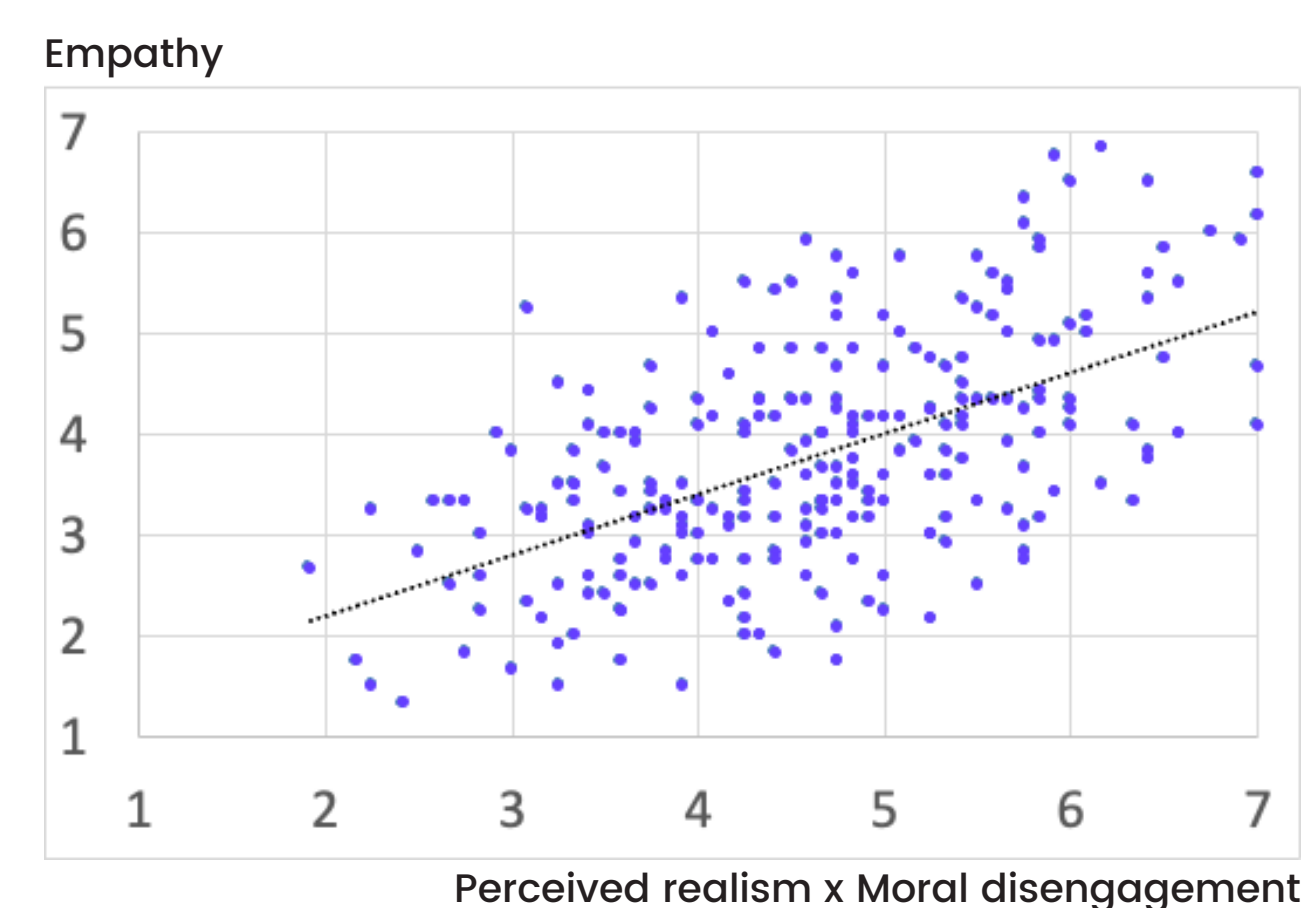


The second experimental study shows a **full mediation** of character morality on aesthetic appreciation ($B = -.485$; 95% CI [-.86, -.11]), mediated through **moral judgement** ($B = .301$; 95% CI [.14, .52]). Whenever the story character is **judged as a morally better person**, regardless of intended, 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, themselves**, and **'you'**. One of the analytical questions to ask is: **'Who is 'you'?**

QUOTE

"**She** 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 **you** step into a marriage where **you** 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 mold of what is considered morally **bad**, we are **more likely to enjoy the stories of characters displaying immoral conduct**.

Published work

De Jonge, J., Demichelis, S., Rebor, S., & Salgaro, M. (2022). Operationalizing perpetrator studies. Focusing readers' reactions to The Kindly Ones by Jonathan Littell. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 51(2), 147-161. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2022-2057>

Relevant literature:

