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Reading Fiction Predicts People's Empathy

What is this research about?

We spend an enormous amount of time engaged with fictional narratives. Our free time often revolves around fictional stories: novels, television shows, and comic books, among other things. It is even thought that some readers, who are often labelled 'bookworms,' turn to literature and fictional characters in order to compensate for the absence of real-world peers. They immerse themselves in an imaginary social world due to the lack of an actual social network.

But despite the prominent role that narratives play in our lives, there is little research on the psychological effects that these narratives might have on us. Some researchers have found that we become immersed in a new world when we read a book or watch a film. In other words, we experience a simulated reality and feel real emotions in response to fictional characters and their relationships. Narratives, according to these researchers, simulate social life. And by engaging with these simulations our own social skills (such as empathy and social understanding) might improve.

Interestingly, research has found that fiction reading predicts greater empathy skills, whereas non-fiction reading predicts worse empathy skills. It may be that, while reading fiction, the simulation of social experience engages the parts of the reader's mind that are employed during real-world social situations. Or it may be that readers of fiction may acquire knowledge about human psychology from the books

What you need to know:

Reading fiction, in and of itself, predicts people's empathy. People who read fiction tend to feel that they have more social support than those who read non-fiction.

they read. Perhaps certain traits in a person predict that he or she will enjoy fiction and also have greater empathy. That is, fiction readers simply may have particular personality traits that also make them more empathetic.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University and the University of Toronto set out to explore, in greater depth, the relationship between reading fiction and empathy. Over 250 participants were asked to complete a number of tasks. The researchers measured the extent to which the participants are readers, specifically the extent to which they immerse themselves in narrative fiction and expository nonfiction. The researchers also measured personality, empathy, isolation, loneliness, stress, and depression.

What did the researchers find?

Researchers found that it is not simply that individuals who are more open to experience tend to enjoy fiction more and also have more empathy. Reading fiction, independent of personality, predicts empathy.

The researchers also found that an ability to project oneself into a story may help to make explain this relationship. It is possible that a person who can immerse herself in a story may be better equipped than a reader of non-fiction when it comes to putting herself in another's mindset.

Finally, the researchers determined that the stereotype of the lonely bookworm is not an accurate one. Readers of fiction do not have smaller social networks. Nor do they feel more stress and loneliness. Among readers of non-fiction, women are happier than men. It may be that they are drawing support from the fictional characters that they encounter in novels. But more research is needed on this subject.

How can you use this research?

This research will be of interest to people who are working on issues of literacy, empathy, and wellness. Given the amount of time which people spend reading fiction, more research is needed on its effects. Future studies should look at the relationship between reading fiction and social skills. They should also draw on larger, more diverse samples.

About the Researchers

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Fiction, Narrative, Reading, Empathy, Social network, Bookworm

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