THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN READING LITERATURE AND EMPATHETIC BEHAVIOUR: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.

INTRODUCTION

The following paper aims to show the tentative link between reading literature and empathy leading to pro-social behaviour, it will be shown that empathetic response may lead to an increase empathy, however further research needs to be conducted before definitive conclusions can be made. There are various considerations when we come to think about how literature might increase empathy, this paper attempts to focus on the levels of reader response which lead to empathetic development, those being; role taking, character identification, fictionality and self-reflection. The information gathered will facilitate and inform the creation of a reading intervention designed to promote empathetic learning.

Empathy first entered the English language in 1909 when British Psychologist Edward Ttichener used it as a translation of the German term 'Einfuhlung', literally meaning 'feeling into' or 'in feeling' (Numanee et al., 2020). The term has since proven to be elusive and relatively flexible with no agreed-upon definition but retaining the same fundamental purpose, best described as 'A person's ability to feel and understand the emotions and feelings of others' or in its simplest terms 'putting oneself in another person's shoes' (Silke et al., 2019). Empathy comes in two primary forms, cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy 'refers to taking the perspective of another person and understanding the circumstances facing the individual' (Louie, 2005), whereas affective empathy is an emotional response to another's emotions. Empathy is a two-stage process requiring an individual, first, to understand where a person is coming from then recognise and imitate the emotion that that circumstance would make them feel. 'Compassionate Empathy' brings this process to its furthest extent as proposed by Numanee et al., in which the empathetic person takes action to help if necessary (Numanee et al., 2020). Empathy is an inherent part of human mentality. It is something we are born with; however, several studies have proven that

it is also a learnable skill that must be strengthened through education and practice (Numanee et al., 2020). Although we are born empathetic, we can quickly lose our ability to empathise with others if we do not continue to do so. An excellent argument is made as to why we should care about empathy and continue to foster its usage and education. Empathy is related to behaviours associated with positive 'other-oriented' values such as personal development, interpersonal relationships and societal well-being (Silke et al., 2019). Encouraging others to practice empathy is a net positive to society.

EMPATHY AND LITERATURE: THEORHETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To study ways of teaching empathy, researchers have begun to look towards reading as a significant source of empathetic learning. This hypothesis at face value seems to be plausible as it has been shown that involvement in non-sport activities is linked to greater pro-social action, specifically among adolescents (Silke, 2019). The concept is reasonably intuitive; when a person reads a novel, they experience what is it like to be someone else, another gender, race or social class. A reader experiences' feelings and perspectives that one either knew about or never even suspected' (Morson, 2013). This process we can call 'Narrative Empathy', defined by Fernandez-Quintanilla as 'the psychological process whereby recipients of narrative texts grasp vicariously experience what they perceive are characters' mental states (Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2020). In a lab setting, Oatley (2013) and Kidd and Castrano (2013) have confirmed this hypothesis. Many researchers have proposed the effects of reading that result in these empathetic responses, the most prominent being Role-Taking, Character Identification, Fictionality and Self-Reflection.

ROLE-TAKING

Role-taking is the process of assuming the role of another individual to understand their point of view. When reading, one momentarily takes on the character's role of the story for as long as they continue reading that story. Through doing this, the reader puts themselves in the role of people they would never have known and see perspectives of which they may never have given thought. This role-taking can happen for any narrative however Hakemulder et al. (2015) has argued that it is mainly the 'literary imagination' of reading fiction that allows us to see through the eyes of another and become an empathetic actor (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Role-taking is very much a personal thought experiment in which the reader surmises what they would do in the situations they are reading about, as informed by

the point of view character and, vicariously, the author. Such is the effect of this role taking that studies have shown that readers can gain the ability to empathise with people who are shown to be guilty of wrongdoing (Walkington et al. 2020; Nikolajeva, 2012). This is significant as readers who empathised with wrongdoers were not particularly able to identify with the characters, showing that empathy can be present beyond what we perceive to be familiar. Junker's studies specifically have emphasised role-taking by incorporating creative writing to encourage empathy learners to describe the narrative from another character's point of view ensuring that readers must be mindful of the ambiguities and inferences of others that is necessary for real-world interaction. Regrettably, we are not sure of what level of role-taking is necessary to experience these empathetic responses, nor do we know when it leads to pro-social behaviour in the real world.

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION

Simultaneously to role-taking readers engage in an equally important effect of reading, character identification. Character identification is the process by which a reader recognises that those they are reading are similar to themselves. While role-taking is useful in transporting the reader into the shoes of another (cognitive empathy) character identification brings the reader to realise that the characters they are reading about are no different from themselves including their feelings. Keen in her book, *Empathy and the Novel (2007)* has argued that character identification lies at the heart of reader empathy and lays out what is necessary for a character to be identifiable; a name, a recognisable situation and implicit feelings (Keen, 2007). From these simple conditions, we see how any reader can likely identify with almost any character to the extent that readers are likely to report that they empathise with animals such as *Black Beauty*. This is important as it means that readers can empathise with non-human others, with implications for environmental empathy should its benefits lead to transferable behaviours in the real world. Keen (2007) also highlights that readers are more likely to identify with characters who are experiencing hardship. Studies on reading literature and empathy have shown similar results with Koopman's (2015) studies of grief and depression showing that readers were easily able to empathise with a character's grief but not with their depression unless the reader had prior experience with the feeling. Similar studies by Reimer (2019) and Louie (2005) have shown that lacking prior experience of a situation can inhibit character-identification. However, this ignorance can be solved by reading itself, as a reader's first contact with the situation becomes what they have read in a novel thus preparing them for future encounters.

FICTIONALITY

As mentioned earlier, the assumption has been made that the experience of narrative empathy is more pervasive in fiction than any other form of writing. Fiction has the unique ability to suspend our perceptions of normality, it is entertainment foremost, and for that, we are quite willing to forget what we know to be true. In doing so, readers allow themselves, whether knowingly or otherwise, to consider other perspectives of our world and interpret events outside of what would be their norm (Louie, 2005). Readers are capable of experimenting, and the framing device of knowing what they are reading is fiction allows them to experiment with positions and characters entirely different from themselves. Particular literary techniques such as gaps in information and ambiguous characterisation allows readers to make more mental inferences (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). The novel becomes a safe space for the reader to come to terms with a point of view without their own opinions being directly challenged and therefore evading the reader's inclination to retaliate and disagree, as Keen has noted, 'releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through scepticism and suspicion'. Novels are also a very natural way to teach empathy as we are drawn to discuss what we have read; it opens a discussion and increases awareness of controversial topics (Hughes & Laffier, 2016). However, it must be said that not enough research has been done on fictionality to give any concrete affirmations on the subject. The link between fiction readers and empathy may be as simple as that empathetic people prefer reading fiction as Argo et al. has stipulated. Indeed Kidd & Castrano (2018) have shown that high empathetic responses are shown to be most common in participants well experienced in reading, but overall participants that read non-fiction showed less empathetic improvement over fiction.

SELF-REFLECTION

It is then on the reader to reflect on the book and convince themselves of what is right. Koopman & Hakemulder (2015) have argued that fictional narratives prompt reflection defined as 'thoughts and insights on oneself, often concerning others, and/or society' and that this reflection encourages 'empathy to emerge for the fullest extend' (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). The time in between reading becomes the most influential, where the reader thinks about what they have read. Now faced with an alternative set of truths and opinions different from their own, it's up to them to decide what they believe. Indeed, self-reflection is likely the only way for empathy in a novel to translate to real-world empathetic action. Before this, all feelings are theoretical and fictional, but now they can be applied to the real world. Keen (2007) brings the notion further by discussing how reading alone, might

not be enough to result in empathy truly and certainly not to bring those empathetic feelings alive in the real world. The key lies in the discussion of the reading. The beauty of reading is that it allows other voices to come into our lives; this is as true for the unique thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of those we discuss the reading with. Their voices are brought into the conversation, and through doing so, readers begin to learn from each other.

It is well known that we find it difficult to empathise with large poorly defined groups, to quote the sorely unempathetic Joseph Stalin 'If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only statistics. Learning empathy through reading can solve this dilemma. Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland (2002) have found that empathising with an individual of a stigmatised group opens the door for improved attitudes for the group as a whole and working towards that group's betterment (Webber & Agiro, 2019). The process of self-reflection allows us to question our place in society and whether or not it is up to us to take responsibility for human suffering. However, as Koopman & Hakemulder (2015) have reaffirmed, we are not certain what conditions require this reflective effect to occur, and its connections to self-change require more research.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Knowing this, and keeping in mind that the work on literature and empathy is very much in its infancy, what studies have been done to research literature and empathy and in what contexts can we see its improvement? Literature and its effects are being studied across multiple fields including education, including medical training, psychology and, sociology.

MEDICAL TRAINING

The desire for empathy in medicine is reasonably straightforward, with a rapidly advancing technological world, the role of nurses and doctors has increasingly become less about their particular insight and more about their humanity. A computer can prescribe medication and perform keyhole surgery, but they cannot empathise with their patient and according to some researchers, increasingly it is empathy that is important to successful medical practice (Herman, 2000). Researchers have begun to look at how medical students can be taught more about empathy to dissuade the 'doctor/patient' mentality in favour of a peer to peer approach in which the practitioner recognises the patient as a 'unique individual with his own understanding of the ill experience' (Tansey, 2016). Tansey's research into reading intervention involved getting young medical students to discuss literature written by

hospitalised patients. Students' discussed memoirs analytically and reflected on their routine and approach, questioning their daily practices. A similar study in Oregon State University on pharmaceutical students pushed this theory further to an eight-week literature intervention (Karin et al., 2017) although their findings were meagre it did show increase in empathy levels to the control group. In a further study by Liao & Wang (2016), it was found that medical students improved in 'behavioural empathy and affective empathy' from their participation in literature acquisition. However, there are several issues with teaching empathy in this context that must be addressed. Namely, it must be recognised that empathy can be self-interested and that it should be instructed that empathetic action be directed at relieving a patient's distress. This issue arises due to the inherent power differentials of the medical world in which health care professionals exert power over patients (Garden, 2007).

EDUCATION

Another sector that has come to the fore in recent years in empathy education is for trainee teachers. Teachers are in a unique position of power over young people whom they may not relate to due to the generational difference between them. Despite this difference, teachers are often primary contacts for students who are suffering from depression, bullying and suicidal thoughts, and as stated prior, individuals find it difficult to empathise with unfamiliar feelings like depression. It is paramount for young people that the teachers they feel safe going to are empathetic individuals. Furthermore, empathy is necessary in the fundamental skills of teaching, being able to 'place yourself in the position of a learner who does not already know the basics' (Morson, 2017). Masko & Bloem have shown that discussing the controversial topics brought up in reading to undergraduate teacher education candidates is an effective way to improve student's understanding of issues like poverty. They did note, however, that those trainee teachers found difficulty linking poverty to racial inequality. Pytash (2013) conducted a similar study of teachers reading literature aimed at young adults that dealt heavily with the subjects of bullying and suicide for educators to see these issues from the students' perspectives. Teachers in this study were able to identify themselves as a person in whom an adolescent would confide.

It would be remiss not to mention the immense benefits to teaching empathy to young people and the studies therein related to literature. Empathy must be practised, and with that practice, it becomes second nature. It makes logical sense to teach young people empathy from an early age to prepare them for interactions throughout their lives. It has been shown that the empathetic process of individuals experienced in childhood has an influence on social

values and civic behaviour into adulthood (Silke et al. 2019). Young people are more likely to empathise with those who are similar to them, so it is imperative that reading opens up new diverse views through role-taking. Many studies have looked into teaching young people empathy through literature with varying age ranges and outcomes. Casale et al. (2018) showed that students aged 14-18 were more likely to express empathy to people who would be traditionally 'other' when their classroom environment fostered openness and diverse viewpoints, allowing discussion as Keen (2007) suggests. Louie (2005) worked to discuss multicultural literature as part of a course discussion. This study included a contextual information phase before the reading intervention in an effort for students to better understand the position the characters were in. This study found varying results among young people noting that only a few 'were willing to experience the feelings of the characters' in the novel (Louie, 2005) The most successful results came from Jamieson's (2015) study of *Oliver Twist* to a group of eighteen seventeen-year-olds through interviews, classroom writing and field notes. These benefits have been echoed in other studies (Thompson et al. 2020, Hughes & Laffier 2016, Yeager 2010, Nikolajeva, 2012). The exception to this would be Junker (2007) who found that his student left 'no more empathetic than when they began the semester.' What is imperative to all is their incorporation in a class-like environment where students are encouraged to take part in the discussion of the text and work on writing exercises on them. However, Junker (2017) warns that writing exercises that do not have some element of role-taking or self-reflection can be more harmful to empathy education as young people will view the exercise as a chore and lose engagement with the material.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST LITERATURE AND EMPATHY

The study of the connection between literature and empathy is still relatively young and experimental in nature. It is no surprise, therefore, that there are many inconclusive results as research is not yet refined on the topic. There are likewise a number of arguments against the notion that reading literature will, in some way improve empathy and pro-social behaviour. Firstly, it remains uncertain how and to what extent reading literature will translate to doing good in the real world. Gregory Currie (2016), in particular, has been outspoken in criticising this aspect of the narrative empathy hypothesis. He notes that the way we empathise for characters in a novel is hugely different from how we do so in real life. In a novel, we have the character's perspective, their beliefs and understandings making it easy to empathise with them. This is lacking in our interactions with people in the real world. Perhaps, for this

reason, we should look to how readers draw a mental inference of emotions to empathise with characters outside of the character's point of view. *Oliver Twist's* Fagin could be a prime example. Currie (2016) has also argued that empathising for character's who cannot help or who resolve their situations by the end of the novel train us that empathy does not need to be followed up by any action. That we can empathise and walk on. This suggests that empathetic education in the future should focus on ensuring that empathy is directed in some way after reading. Directing empathy is an impressively potent way of inciting action. Michael Fischer has discussed how former US President Ronald Regan directed voter's empathy away from those receiving disability payments towards downtrodden taxpayers to lower public funding (Fischer, 2017). There is undoubtedly an ugly head to empathy if used in this way, and it will be up to educators to highlight the 'wrong way' to use empathy in the real world.

There is also a severe issue of inadvertently teaching stereotypes. Try as we might to teach the benefits of coming to learn more about the position of immigrants or disadvantaged workers, we may ultimately read characterisations of real people that are completely untrue. Keen states that shallow prototypes of emotional life may impair a reader's imagination and own emotions (Keen, 2007). When looking to teach empathy through literature, a researcher must be meticulous in the texts that they selected. The selection must give genuinely appropriate reflections of real-life and therefore several books must be selected on one topic to highlight the differences inherent in each text to reach a universal truth. Novels that feature characters defying stereotypes can help students identify these stereotypes (Webber & Agiro, 2019). Another concern with teaching empathy is that students will read a novel and then believe they know enough of the situation to be satisfied with what they understand. It should be emphasised to learners that these are only a selection of experiences of incredibly nuanced situations. Failure to recognise these limitations to literature has led to some popular works of writing contributing historically to spreading ignorance, hatred and violence and should be avoided.

Due to the novel nature of this area of empathy research, we cannot give definitive answers as to how, why or to what extent any of these effects have on empathy. Indeed, it must be remembered that the evidence remains scanty and our posturing on empathetic benefits is largely theoretical in nature for the time being. Not everyone will read a book and feel empathetic; not every book will have the qualities required to make a person empathetic. Keen has highlighted the considerable number of factors in reader identity alone that can cause variation in empathetic response, including age, experience, location, culture, historical

context and the reader's ability and attention while reading. Empathy is complicated and requires serious empirical research that understands that results will likely be context-dependant, that there is 'need for a nuanced approach that accommodates complex interactions between textual and reading factors'. (Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2020) Of the four effects of reading associated with empathy, there is in truth no one that is the linchpin of novelistic empathy, and there are likely to be more theories to come proposing other effects. In all likelihood, it is a mixture of these effects that may lead to an empathetic reader.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, empathy is an incredibly powerful emotion when fostered, nurtured and directed appropriately. It is a human quality which could, in future, lead to significant social progress and one way we can look to teaching empathy is through reading literature. Work has already begun to show the benefits of literature to teaching empathy in several fields, and it's the joining of these literary and sociological worlds that should be embraced in future work. However novelistic empathy requires many effects to be effective; the readers must identify with the character, they must relate to the situation, and they must analyse the situation they are reading and compare it to the world around them. Finally, it has been suggested that the effects of reading literature are glacial and take time it may be more important to teach people to become avid readers first to see empathetic results (Fischer, 2017). Although there is still much work to be done, and the evidence as of yet is scanty, it is nonetheless a promising endeavour.

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