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Story Perspective and Character Similarity as Drivers of Identification and Narrative Persuasion

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Identification with a character is an important mechanism of narrative persuasion. In 2 studies, the impact of character similarity on identification was pitted against that of story perspective. Participants read stories in which a lawyer (Study 1) and a general practitioner (GP; Study 2) had a conflict with another character. Perspective was manipulated by describing the events as experienced and narrated by the lawyer (GP) or their opponent. In Study 1 (N = 120), 60 participants were law students, in Study 2 (N = 120) 60 were medical students. Both perspective and program of study influenced identification, which mediated the impact of perspective on attitude. If participants felt highly similar to the professional's opponent, the mediating effect of identification was blocked.

Keywords: Narrative Persuasion, Identification, Perceived Similarity, Storytelling Techniques, Story Perspective.

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One of the few human universals is our need to tell and listen to narratives (Brown, 1991). We seek out stories for the pleasure they bring. However, narratives may provide more than entertainment. Toolan (2001, p. 8) defines narrative as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can 'learn.'" There is ample evidence that people learn in the sense that they adapt their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors after reading or watching a story.

Stories can influence people's beliefs about, for instance, the causes of adolescents dropping out of school (Strange & Leung, 1999), the extent to which people in need of help are responsible for the trouble they are in (Hoeken & Hustinx, 2007), or whether psychiatric patients should be entitled to leaves from their institution (Green & Brock, 2000). Appel and Richter (2007) have shown that these persuasive effects are not

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short-lived and may even increase over time. When and how these effects come about has now become the focus of scholarly attention (see, e.g., Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013; Weber & Wirth, 2014).

Toolan's (2001) definition suggests that we learn from the experiences of the story characters. This would imply that the involvement of the audience with narrative characters, commonly referred to as identification, plays an important role in bringing about these effects. In the section that follows, research documenting how identification can act as a mechanism of narrative persuasion will be discussed. Next, one audience-based determinant of identification (perceived similarity) and a story-based determinant (story perspective) are introduced. The studies reported in this article aim to assess whether a story perspective can counter, or even override, the natural tendency to identify with a similar character and how the combination of these factors influences the narrative's impact.

Identification as a mechanism of narrative persuasion

Oatley (1999, p. 445) describes identification as taking "on the protagonist's goals and plans," as a result of which the audience "experiences emotions when these plans go well or badly." There is ample empirical evidence for the importance of identification in narrative persuasion. Identifying with characters from episodes of television series increased risk perceptions of teen pregnancy yielding higher intentions to have safe sex (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010), as well as higher intentions to talk about sexually transmitted infections with friends (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011). Identification has been shown to influence story consistent beliefs held by the audience (Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012), social distancing toward people with a mental illness (Caputo & Rouner, 2011), supporting students suffering from depression (McKeever, 2015), and attitudes toward the death penalty (Till & Vitouch, 2012). Even for short narratives in antidrinking and antimeth public service announcements and beer ads, identification is important for their persuasive success (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014).

Green and Donahue (2009, p. 247) propose two ways in which identification may have a persuasive impact. First, people may be more susceptible to the attitudes held by the character with whom they identify. De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, and Beentjes (2012) have provided evidence for this mechanism. In one experiment, a story was used about two sisters whose mother was in an irreversible coma. One of the sisters was willing to consider euthanasia, whereas the other strongly opposed it. Identification was manipulated by presenting two versions of the story, the only difference being whether the character from whose perspective the story events were related was in favor of or against considering euthanasia.

The results revealed that participants identified more strongly with the perspectivizing character as opposed to the other sister regardless of whether the character was in favor or against considering euthanasia. Depending on the perspectivizing character's opinion, participants held more or less favorable attitudes toward considering euthanasia. A mediation analysis showed that the effect of the perspective

manipulation on the attitude was mediated by the extent to which participants identified with a character.

Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) were able to replicate this finding using a different story on a different issue. Students read a story containing a discussion scene between two students about the pros and cons of a college tuition raise. The manipulation consisted of the perspectivizing character being in favor or against the tuition raise, which led participants to identify more strongly with the perspectivizing character even if this character expressed opinions that went against their own interests, that is, even when this character defended the college tuition raise. As in the study by De Graaf et al. (2012), the extent of identification mediated the impact of the perspective manipulation on the attitude toward the tuition raise. Thus, even if a story character held an opinion counter to the one held by the readers, identification with this character led to adopting this character's attitude. This provides strong evidence for the persuasive potential of stories and the importance of identification for realizing it.

According to Green and Donahue (2009), a second way in which identification may influence people's attitudes is through the implications of events experienced by the character with whom people identify. Identification implies taking over the character's goals and plans, which in turn leads to experiencing different emotions depending on whether these plans work out or fail (Oatley, 1999). Emotions can play an important role in persuasion in general (see Dillard & Seo, 2013; Nabi, 2010). For narrative persuasion, several studies have shown that emotions are strong predictors of narrative impact (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2009).

Hoeken and Sinkeldam (2014) manipulated the degree of identification by portraying the main character as more or less sympathetic. When this character got into trouble because of new government regulations, participants who identified more strongly with this character also experienced negative emotions more strongly and formed a more negative attitude toward the new regulations. Hoeken and Sinkeldam showed that this effect of character manipulation on the attitude was serially mediated by the identification–emotion link. There is, thus, evidence for both ways in which identification is believed to fuel the narrative persuasion process. Given its importance for narrative impact, the question arises what factors determine identification.

Character-based determinants of identification

Identification can be determined by the audience's perception of a character. More specifically, liking a character and perceiving the character as similar to oneself have been pointed out as drivers of identification (Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2001, 2006). In several studies, the manipulation of a character's likeability has succeeded in influencing the level of identification with that character (e.g., Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In this study, the focus will be on perceived similarity as a driver of identification.

Several studies have reported positive correlations between perceived similarity and identification (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Murphy et al., 2013; Pinkleton,

Austin, & Van de Vord, 2010). In three studies, similarity was manipulated. De Graaf (2014) had students read a story about a student who either lived with her parents or in student housing. Participants were asked where they lived themselves. If the living conditions matched, the participants perceived themselves as more similar to the protagonist than if these conditions mismatched. However, matching or mismatching living conditions had no effect on identification. Andsager, Bemker, Choi, and Torwel (2006) developed two stories that only differed with respect to the protagonist drinking alcohol or not. They also assessed whether participants drank alcohol. If the (non)drinking behavior of the participant matched that of the protagonist, they perceived themselves as more similar to the protagonist. McKeever (2015) found that participants perceived themselves as more similar to a person in a news story if that person was a student at the same university than if he was not. Neither Andsager et al. nor McKeever measured identification but they both found perceived similarity to predict the message's persuasiveness.

The fact that De Graaf (2014) did not find effects of similar living conditions on identification may be caused by how similarity was evoked. Cohen (2006, p. 188) claims that psychological similarity (e.g., having similar attitudes or personality traits) is more important for identification than demographic similarity (such as gender and age). De Graaf's "living conditions" manipulation can be considered a demographic similarity, whereas the "alcohol drinking" manipulation may be more related to psychological similarities.

In the study reported in this article, similarity was manipulated by varying the participants' study background. Because we may assume that people choose a program of study that matches their interests and capacities, we had law students and humanities students read a story in which one of the characters is a lawyer. We predict that shared interests and capacities will influence perceived similarity and identification:

H1: Law students will perceive themselves as more similar to the lawyer and will identify more strongly with him than the humanities students.

Story perspective guiding identification

As a separate class of identification determinants, Cohen (2006) points to authorial or storytelling techniques. In the case of written stories, the strategic use of language can guide people to identify with certain characters. Deploying a first-person story perspective is one of those techniques, because story events are represented through the eyes of a narrating character who refers to him- or herself as "I," thereby inviting readers strongly to take the position of the protagonist. The "I"-character, thus, becomes the deictic centre in which the text is referentially grounded; by default, speakers implicitly perceive and think from this centre (Graesser, Olde, & Klettke, 2002). The first-person perspective also invites readers to process the presented information from their own spatial body perspective (Brunyé, Ditman, Mahoney, Augustyn, & Taylor, 2009). Neuropsychological research on visual perspectives has shown that first-person perspective is processed differently than third-person

perspective (Vogeley et al., 2004). The "I"-perspective has indeed proven to be a strong driver of identification (see De Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014).[1]

In the present study, a story of a court case about a murder was used. The main characters were the lawyer defending the murderer and the widow of the murder victim. The versions were varied with respect to the perspectivizing character. In one version, the events were perceived from the "I"-perspective of the lawyer, whereas they were perceived from the "I"-perspective of the widow in the other version. We predict that this manipulation will impact identification.

H2: Participants will identify more strongly with the perspectivizing character than with the other character.

Story perspective and perceived similarity as opposing forces in identification

Based on Hypotheses 1 and 2, identification is expected to be highest for the perspectivizing "similar" character and lowest for the "dissimilar" character if it is not the perspectivizing character. The question is how identification will be affected if the story is told from the perspective of a dissimilar character. Does similarity neutralize or even override the influence of story perspective on identification or does story perspective neutralize or override the influence of similarity on identification?

Two studies have reported results relevant to this issue. In the first experiment reported in De Graaf et al. (2012), students had to read a story about a handicapped web designer applying for a job. The story was told from the perspective of either the handicapped applicant or a company employee. Participants identified much more strongly with the applicant than with the employee when the story was told from the applicant's perspective. However, when the story was told from the employee's perspective, participants identified equally strong with the employee as with the applicant. Students were more likely to have been in the position of an applicant at a job interview than in the position of a member of the selection committee. This may have increased the perceived similarity with the applicant neutralizing the effect of story perspective. In the study by Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) in which two students discussed the pros and cons of a college tuition raise, story perspective led participants to identify with the student in favor of the tuition raise, even though they themselves held negative attitudes toward such a raise. These findings suggest that story perspective can override to a certain extent the effect of perceived similarity on identification. Neither De Graaf et al. (2012) nor Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) manipulated or measured similarity and were therefore not able to assess its impact. The current study enabled addressing this question.

RQ1: To what extent are story perspective and similarity relative determinants of identification?

The third hypothesis is about the persuasive effect of story perspective. In the story, the lawyer pleads that the accused should not be convicted of murder but of manslaughter and, as a result, should receive a much shorter sentence. The widow is horrified by the lawyer's plea and cannot believe that the person who caused her and

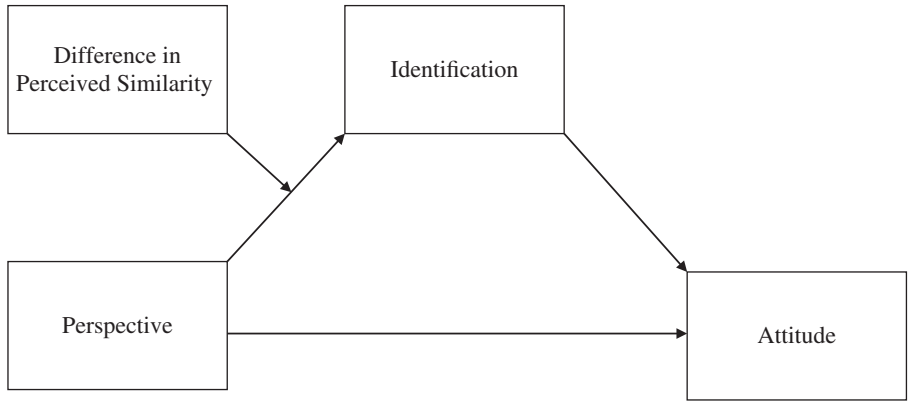

Figure 1 Moderation of mediation effect of identification.

her family so much grief should receive a short sentence. In previous studies, identification has been shown to mediate the impact of story perspective on the attitude, which leads to the third prediction.

H3: Story perspective will influence the attitude toward a reduced sentence.

However, if perceived similarity were to moderate the impact of story perspective on identification, this would imply that the impact on the attitude would be moderated as well. This leads to the second research question.

RQ2: To what extent is the mediating impact of identification on the attitude moderated by perceived similarity?

Figure 1 provides a display of how perceived similarity could moderate the mediating effect of identification.

Study 1

Method

Participants

In total, 120 participants took part in the experiment. Half of them were students of the Faculty of Humanities, and the other were students of the Faculty of Law at a university in the eastern part of the Netherlands. More female (68.3%) than male (31.7%) participants took part in the experiment. Age ranged from 18 to 27 years with an average of 21 years.

Material

The experimental materials[2] consisted of two versions of a story that was originally published in the Dutch anthology "Moord" (Murder; Vuyk, 2008). In this book, well-known lawyers tell true stories to illustrate their strategies in defending people

accused of murder. In the story at hand, a Dutch lawyer reported on a case in which he defended a man who had been sentenced to 15 years in jail for committing a murder. The lawyer appealed against this verdict because he claimed that this was a case of manslaughter instead of murder. Therefore, the defendant should be sentenced to 2 years in jail.

In the original version, the story was told from the perspective of the lawyer. He described what the courtroom looked like and what the relevant testimonies were. He also related his inner thoughts: what his strategy is (i.e., showing that witnesses incorrectly ascribed the intention to kill to his client) and his ideas about how we often incorrectly ascribe intentions to other people. He also describes a response to the family of the murder victim feeling that he should not defend someone who has already confessed to the crime.

> The victim's wife has publicly asked herself how I can defend my client knowing that he has killed her husband and as a result caused her and her family a lot of grief. My answer to that question is quite simple: It is my duty as a lawyer. . . . In addition, everyone is entitled to a fair trial: a defendant, a convicted person, or victim. It is doubtlessly a horrible crime, but I defend the defendant, not the act. . . . According to the District's Attorney, it is a case of premeditation, and thus murder. He has never had the intention to kill the victim when he walked to his car. That is my main objection to the DA. There has never been an intention, so how can the DA state that this is a case of premeditated murder? The defendant believes he deserves a jail sentence, but that it should be a fair sentence.

The manipulated version was rewritten such that the murder victim's widow was the "I"-narrator who described from her perspective the same objects and events, but, by contrast, expressed explicitly her feelings of sorrow and distress about the possibility that the defendant's sentence would be severely reduced. This version also included her thoughts that it is difficult to understand how a lawyer can defend a man who had already confessed to killing her husband. She stated that the lawyer probably believes that everyone is entitled to a fair trial.

> I ask myself how the lawyer can defend his client knowing that he has killed someone. I can think of only one answer: He will probably think that everyone is entitled to a fair trial, but that is something I find hard to understand. He is defending someone who killed my husband, the father of my children. Someone who has caused me and my family a lot of grief. . . . That is the main objection that the lawyer raises against the District Attorney. He states that it all happened in a reflex. I cannot believe my ears, such nonsense! A reflex or not, it is still murder. How can he doubt whether this is a case of murder? It is nonsense that I am sitting here for the appeal; the court in Groningen has sentenced him to fifteen years in jail based upon his own statement. For murder. What do they think they are achieving with this, it only causes us grief.

Both versions were equally long with respect to the number of words (1,260) and the number of paragraphs (11). There were slightly more sentences in the version in which the events were related from the widow's perspective (91) compared to the version in which the lawyer was the perspectivizing character (86).

Questionnaire

The dependent variables were measured by having participants fill out a questionnaire. First, the attitude toward sentence reduction was measured employing four 7-point semantic differentials (e.g., positive – negative, desirable – undesirable) preceded by the clause: "Asking for a sentence reduction (from 15 to 2 years) for a defendant who has confessed, I find." The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .80$.

The various dimensions of transportation and identification were measured with scales that had been developed and used successfully in previous studies (De Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014). Seven 7-point Likert scales were employed to measure the concept of narrative presence, for instance: "When reading the story, I felt like being present at the story events." The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .82$. The attentional focus dimension of transportation was measured with four Likert items, for instance, "During reading, my attention was fully captured by what was happening in the story" and "During reading, I did not notice things happening around me." The scale's reliability was $\alpha = .87$.

Identification with the widow and the lawyer were each measured with four items, for instance, "During reading, I empathized with the widow/lawyer." If the widow was the protagonist, the items concerning the widow were asked first; if the lawyer was the protagonist, the items concerning the lawyer were asked first. The reliabilities of both scales were: identification widow ($\alpha = .93$) and identification lawyer ($\alpha = .91$).

Next, the extent to which participants felt similar to the widow and lawyer was measured employing four items for each character developed by McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975). Examples of these items are "I think that the widow (lawyer) thinks the same as I do" and "I think that the widow (lawyer) is similar to me." The reliabilities of both scales measuring similarity to widow ($\alpha = .92$) and similarity to lawyer ($\alpha = .90$) were good.[3]

The extent to which the story evoked emotions was measured using five items (The story made me sad, ashamed, angry, scared, and guilty). The items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .90$). The extent to which the story was perceived as realistic was measured using four semantic differentials (e.g., believable – unbelievable, realistic – unrealistic) preceded by the clause "I thought the story was." The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .91$.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, program of study, and in which year of the program they were in.

Procedure

Participants were approached either in the computer rooms or meeting areas of the Faculty of Humanities building or in those of the law school. They were asked whether they were willing to take part in an experiment on the evaluation of stories on court cases. If they agreed to participate, they received at random one of the versions of the experimental booklet that only differed with respect to the story the booklet contained. After they had finished reading the story and filled out the questionnaire, they were informed about the goal of the study and any remaining questions were answered. An experimental session lasted 17 minutes on average.

Table 1 Means (and *SDs*) of Study 1 for Narrative Presence, Attentional Focus, Perceived Realism, Emotions, Perceived Similarity, Identification, and Attitude as a Function of the Perspectivizing Character and Students' Program (1 = negative, 7 = positive) ($n = 30$ per cell)

	Humanities Students		Law Students	
	Widow	Lawyer	Widow	Lawyer
Narrative presence	4.29[a] (1.37)	4.82[a] (1.01)	4.96[a] (0.98)	4.73[a] (1.47)
Attentional focus	3.68[a] (1.28)	4.13[a] (1.16)	4.63[b] (1.25)	4.54[b] (1.53)
Perceived realism	3.81[a] (1.47)	3.48[a] (1.14)	3.63[a] (1.44)	4.58[a] (1.36)
Emotions	3.12[a] (1.08)	2.66[a] (0.82)	2.68[a] (1.02)	2.85[a] (0.93)
Feeling similar to				
Widow	3.55[a] (1.40)	3.25[a] (1.20)	2.87[b] (1.27)	2.81[b] (1.21)
Lawyer	2.44[a] (1.05)	3.32[b] (1.21)	3.44[b] (1.16)	3.51[b] (1.24)
Identification with				
Widow	3.45[a] (1.08)	2.52[b] (1.24)	3.24[a] (1.19)	2.54[b] (1.24)
Lawyer	2.60[a] (1.18)	3.71[b] (1.13)	3.37[b] (1.34)	4.16[c] (1.35)
Attitude	2.87[a] (1.05)	4.17[b] (0.96)	4.17[b] (1.24)	4.66[b] (1.08)

Note: Different superscripts indicate significant differences.

Results

First,[4] a 2 (perspective widow, perspective lawyer) × 2 (humanities students, law students) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to check whether the perspective manipulation had had an impact on perceived realism, attention, narrative presence, or emotions. In Table 1, the results for these variables are presented. There was no main effect of perspective manipulation (Wilks' $\lambda = .986$, $F(4, 113) < 1$). There was a main effect of study program (Wilks' $\lambda = .862$, $F(4, 113) = 4.51$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .138$). Subsequent univariate analyses revealed that law students indicated that they had paid more attention to the story than the humanities students ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.39$ vs. $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.23$; $F(1, 116) = 8.05$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .065$). The interaction between perspective and study program did not reach conventional levels of significance (Wilks' $\lambda = .93$, $F(4, 113) = 2.14$, $p = .08$), nor did any of the univariate analyses ($ps > .064$).

Next, the question was addressed whether perceived similarity with the characters was influenced by study program and story perspective. A 2 (similarity with widow or lawyer; within-participants) × 2 (law students, humanities students) × 2 (widow's perspective, lawyer's perspective) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. None of the main effects was significant, nor was the interaction between story perspective and study program ($Fs (1, 116) < 1$). The three way interaction did not reach conventional levels of significance ($F(1, 116) = 3.25$, $p = .074$).

There were significant interactions between study program and character ($F(1, 116) = 15.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$) and between story's perspective and character ($F(1, 116) = 4.98$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .041$). Simple effects revealed that while law students felt

more similar to the lawyer ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.19$) than to the widow ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.23$; $p = .002$), humanities students felt more similar to the widow ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.31$) than to the lawyer ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.21$; $p = .013$). The second interaction indicated that story perspective had no effect on perceived similarity with the widow ($p = .44$), whereas participants perceived themselves as more similar to the lawyer when the story was told from his perspective ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.22$) than when the story was told from the widow's perspective ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.21$; $p = .03$).

The identification with lawyer and identification with widow scores were analyzed with a similar three-way mixed ANOVA as was used for the similarity scores. Hypothesis 1 predicted that law students would identify more strongly with the lawyer than with the widow. The interaction between study program and character was indeed significant ($F(1, 116) = 5.99$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .049$). Law students identified more strongly with the lawyer ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.53$) than with the widow ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.52$; $p = .001$), whereas no such difference was found for the humanities students ($p = .971$). This also resulted in a main effect with participants identifying more strongly with the lawyer ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.49$) than with the widow ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.50$; $F(1, 116) = 6.24$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2 = .051$). None of the other main effects was significant nor was the interaction between story perspective and study program ($ps > .15$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that identification with the widow or lawyer would depend on story perspective. The interaction between perspective and character was significant ($F(1, 116) = 44.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .278$). Participants identified more strongly with the widow when the story was told from her perspective ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.35$) than from the lawyer's perspective ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.45$; $p < .001$), whereas the opposite result was found for identification with the lawyer (lawyer perspective: $M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.38$; widow perspective: $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.41$; $p < .001$).

Research Question 1 was about the extent to which story perspective may override the effect of similarity or the other way around. For law students, perceived similarity may have guided with whom they identified, whereas for humanities students, story perspective would have been the crucial factor. If that were the case, the three-way interaction should be significant which was not the case ($F(1, 116) = 1.51$, $p = .22$). This suggests that both perspective and similarity contribute (additively) to identification with a character.

Next, the question was addressed to what extent the participants' attitude was influenced by perspective and study program. Both factors had (identical) main effects ($F(1, 116) = 20.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$) on the attitude.[5] After reading the story told from the lawyer's perspective, participants held more favorable attitudes toward sentence reduction than after reading the one told from the widow's perspective ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.04$ vs. $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.31$). Law students held more favorable attitudes than humanities students ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.18$ vs. $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.19$). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 116) = 4.17$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .035$). Simple effects revealed that while the effect of perspective was

highly significant for the humanities students ($p < .001$), there was only a trend for the law students ($p = .082$).

Finally, the question was addressed whether the effect of perspective was mediated by identification with one or both of the characters, and if so, whether this effect was moderated by the extent to which participants felt more similar to one of the characters. First, the perceived similarity score for the lawyer was subtracted from that for the widow. This resulted in an overall mean of −.06 ($SD = 1.73$). A one-sample t test revealed that this mean did not differ significantly from zero ($t(119) = .37$, $p = .709$; mode and median = .00).

Subsequently, a conditional multiple mediator analysis employing Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (model 7; 10,000 bootstraps, 95% confidence interval) was employed with identification with lawyer and identification with widow as mediators, difference in perceived similarity as moderator, while controlling for perceived realism, attention, narrative presence, and emotion. This analysis enabled an assessment as to whether identification with the lawyer and identification with the widow mediated the effect of story perspective on attitude when participants felt more similar to the lawyer (1 standard deviation below the mean difference in perceived similarity scores), more similar to the widow (1 standard deviation above the mean), or equally similar to both characters (mean score).

Identification with the lawyer proved to mediate the effect of story perspective on attitude regardless of whether participants felt more similar to the lawyer ($B = .153$, $SE = .087$, CI = .02 to .38), equally similar to both characters ($B = .22$, $SE = .088$, CI = .08 to .43), or more similar to the widow ($B = .287$, $SE = .126$, CI = .09 to .59). The index of moderated mediation was not significant (index = .038, $SE = .037$, CI = −.02 to .13). The results for the identification with the widow revealed a different pattern. Although there were significant indirect effects if participants felt more similar to the lawyer ($B = .388$, $SE = .124$, CI = .18 to .68) or equally similar to both characters ($B = .248$, $SE = .086$, CI = .11 to .45), the indirect effect was not significant if participants felt more similar to the widow ($B = .109$, $SE = .104$, CI = −.07 to .36). The index of moderated mediation was significant (index = −.081, $SE = .044$, CI = −.19 to −.01). This indicates that for participants who felt more similar to the widow, reading the story from the lawyer's perspective did not lead to a stronger identification with the lawyer compared to those reading the story from the widow's perspective.

Discussion

Both perceived similarity and story perspective influenced the extent to which participants identified with a character. Replicating the results of previous studies, identification mediated the impact of story perspective on attitude. Only for participants who felt more similar to the widow than to the lawyer, perspective had no impact on identification with the widow. No such effect, however, was found for identification with the lawyer. Before discussing general implications and limitations, the results of

a second study addressing the exact same hypotheses and research questions will be reported. The study was conducted to assess whether these results could be replicated. In this study, students from the Faculty of Humanities and from medical school read a story about a dilemma that was either told from the perspective of the son of a patient or from the perspective of a GP.

Study 2

Method

Participants

A total of 120 participants from a university in the eastern part of the Netherlands took part. Age varied from 17 to 27 with a mean of 20.5 years. More women (60.5%) than men (39.5%) took part. Half of the participants were students at the Faculty of Humanities, the other half were medical students.

Material

A story was employed in which the son of a patient suffering from Alzheimer is visiting his father's GP. The father had made him promise to ask for euthanasia in case he could no longer ask for it himself. He has also deposited a disposition of will. The GP knows about this arrangement but is in doubt on how to respond: To what extent is the father still the person who wanted not to live like this? He tells the son that he needs some time to think about it and schedules a new appointment. The events were related from either the son's or the GP's perspective. Both versions were of equal length (1,340 words, 97 sentences) and the main part, the conversation between the son and the GP, was covered in both versions.

Questionnaire

The same dependent variables as in Study 1 were measured. Three items measured the attitude toward a GP's obligation to fulfill the request of a patient who has officially signed a disposition of will (e.g., if someone has signed a disposition of will that he or she wants to be euthanized when suffering from Alzheimer, a GP has to fulfill that request). The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .81$). The same dependent variables as in Study 1 were measured, all resulting in reliable scales (identification GP: $\alpha = .92$; identification son: $\alpha = .91$; similarity GP: $\alpha = .92$; similarity son: $\alpha = .91$; attention: $\alpha = .90$; narrative presence: $\alpha = .94$; perceived realism: $\alpha = .74$; emotions: $\alpha = .81$).[6]

Design and procedure

Participants were approached either in the computer rooms or meeting point of the Faculty of Humanities building or in those of the medical school. They were asked whether they were willing to take part in an experiment on the evaluation of stories. If they agreed to participate, they received at random one of the versions of the experimental booklet that only differed with respect to the story the booklet contained. After they had finished reading the story and filled out the questionnaire, they were

Table 2 Means (and *SDs*) of Study 2 for Narrative Presence, Attentional Focus, Perceived Realism, Emotions, Perceived Similarity, Identification, and Attitude as a Function of the Perspectivizing Character and Students' Program (1 = negative, 7 = positive) ($n = 30$ per cell)

	Humanities Students		Medical Students	
	Son	GP	Son	GP
Narrative presence	4.97[a] (0.92)	4.34[a] (1.09)	4.30[a] (1.35)	4.55[a] (1.43)
Attentional focus	4.83[a] (1.17)	4.14[a] (1.00)	3.76[a] (1.50)	4.19[a] (1.66)
Perceived realism	5.55[a] (0.54)	5.29[a] (0.69)	5.67[a] (0.52)	5.39[a] (0.99)
Emotions	2.87[a] (1.08)	2.21[a] (1.08)	2.41[a] (1.04)	2.21[a] (1.04)
Feeling similar to				
Son	4.14[a] (1.16)	3.66[a] (1.23)	4.04[a] (1.36)	3.66[a] (1.33)
GP	3.35[a] (1.15)	3.67[a] (1.30)	3.98[b] (1.37)	4.11[b] (1.34)
Identification with				
Son	5.54[a] (1.15)	4.76[b] (1.03)	5.30[a] (1.15)	4.82[b] (1.20)
GP	4.36[a] (1.09)	5.03[b] (1.28)	5.19[a] (1.22)	5.73[b] (1.10)
Attitude	5.26[a] (0.94)	5.17[a] (1.06)	5.13[a] (0.92)	4.93[a] (1.07)

GP = general practitioner.
Note: Different superscripts indicate significant differences.

informed about the goal of the study and any remaining questions were answered. An experimental session lasted 18 minutes on average.

Results

In order to check whether the perspective manipulation had procured unintended effects on attention, narrative presence, perceived realism, and emotions, a 2 (study program) × 2 (story perspective) MANOVA was conducted (see Table 2 for descriptives). None of the main effects or interactions met conventional levels of significance ($ps > .09$). The three-way mixed ANOVA for perceived similarity revealed that, although the means were in the predicted directions, the interactions between study program and character ($F(1, 116) = 3.01$, $p = .085$, $\eta^2 = .025$) and story perspective and character ($F(1, 116) = 3.83$, $p = .053$, $\eta^2 = .032$) did not meet conventional levels of significance. None of the other effects was significant ($ps > .14$). Hypothesis 1 predicted that medical school students would perceive themselves as more similar to the GP than humanities students. The interaction between study program and perspective did not reach conventional levels of significance ($F(1, 116) = 3.01$, $p = .085$, $\eta^2 = .025$). However, a t test for independent samples revealed that medical school students perceived themselves as more similar to the GP than the humanities students ($t(118) = 2.27$, $p = .025$), thereby lending support for Hypothesis 1.

Both H1 and H2 with respect to identification were confirmed in this study as well. Simple effects revealed that the significant interaction between character identification and study program ($F(1, 115) = 15.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .118$) was the result of

medical students identifying more strongly with the GP than with the son ($p = .011$) whereas humanities students identified more strongly with the son than with the GP ($p = .004$). The significant interaction between story perspective and character identification ($F(1, 115) = 32.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .219$) was the result of participants identifying more strongly with the son if the story was told from the son's perspective ($p = .003$), whereas they identified more strongly with the GP when told from the GP's perspective ($p = .006$). Overall, there was a tendency for medical students to identify more strongly with both characters compared to the humanities students but this effect did not meet conventional levels of significance ($F(1, 115) = 3.402$, $p = .068$, $\eta^2 = .029$); none of the other main effects or interactions was significant ($ps > .31$). As opposed to the previous study, a two-way ANOVA for the attitude scores revealed no significant effects ($ps > .33$).

Even though there were no effects on the attitude, it is possible that story perspective had had an indirect effect on the attitude through identification. Similar to the previous study, the extent to which participants felt similar to the GP was subtracted from the extent to which they felt similar to the son. As in Study 1, the resulting mean ($M = .10$, $SD = 1.87$) did not differ significantly from zero ($t(119) = .58$, $p = .56$; median and mode = .00).

A similar conditional analysis as for the previous study was conducted. Identification with the GP proved to mediate the effect of story perspective on attitude regardless of whether participants felt more similar to the GP ($B = -.187$, $SE = .097$, CI = −.44 to −.04), equally similar to both characters ($B = -.179$, $SE = .077$, CI = −.37 to −.06), or more similar to the son ($B = -.171$, $SE = .099$, CI = −.42 to −.02). The index of moderated mediation was not significant (index = .005, $SE = .032$, CI = −.06 to .07). The results for the identification with the son revealed a different pattern. Although there were significant indirect effects if participants felt more similar to the GP ($B = -.21$, $SE = .116$, CI = −.49 to −.03) or equally similar to both characters ($B = -.117$, $SE = .074$, CI = −.31 to −.01), the indirect effect was not significant if participants felt more similar to the son ($B = -.02$, $SE = .08$, CI = −.19 to .13). The confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation, however, included zero ($B = .052$, $SE = .035$, CI = −.008 to .13).

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 were to a large extent replicated in this study. Both character similarity and story perspective determined the level of identification, and identification mediated the impact of story perspective on the attitude. When participants felt highly similar to the nonprofessional character (i.e., the son), story perspective no longer influenced the attitude through identification. In the next section, the general implications and limitations of the results of these two studies will be discussed.

General discussion

The studies presented here attest to the importance of identification as a mechanism of narrative persuasion by replicating the results of previous research using two

different stories on different topics. More importantly, in both studies, the impact of an audience-based driver of identification, character similarity, was pitted against that of story-based driver, story perspective. The results reveal that participants identified more strongly with a character that had completed a similar study program as they are following now. However, the impact of story perspective proved stronger: Law readers as well as medical readers identified more strongly with the protagonist even if the antagonist was a lawyer or a GP. These findings suggest that the strategic use of language can have readers identify more strongly with a character even in the presence of an alternative character they perceive as more similar to themselves.

In both studies, similarity moderated the mediating effect of identification. If participants felt more similar to the generic character, that is, the widow in the first study and the patient's son in the second, the indirect effect of identification became nonsignificant. This effect occurred in both studies, despite the fact that the extent to which participants identified with this character was quite low in the first and quite high in the second study.

No such effect was found for feeling highly similar to the other character (lawyer, GP). This difference in effect may be the result of several differences between the opposing characters and the roles they play in the narrative. The widow and the son act as private persons and are dependent on others for attaining their goals, goals that are heavily fraught with emotions. The lawyer and the GP act from their professional role and their stake in the outcome is lower and related to their professional identity.

The dependent position of widow and son may have evoked the underdog scheme. Kim et al. (2008, p. 2568) stated that "people in our society have a highly accessible schema or script about struggling and overmatched entities, or underdogs, and that they root for them in comparison to advantaged entities, or top dogs." Several studies have shown that people indeed sympathize more with the underdogs in political, business, sports, and artistic contexts (see, e.g., Goldschmied & Vandello, 2012; Kim et al., 2008). Apart from feeling similar to a character, liking a character—for instance, because of it being the underdog—can also evoke identification with this character (Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2006). Reasoning in this way, the increased liking of the character as a result of it being an underdog may have tipped the balance in favor of identifying with this character, even if it was not the perspectivizing one. Given that this effect only occurred for participants who felt more similar to the widow or son than to the lawyer or GP, an important conclusion is that perceiving a character as the underdog is not enough to overcome the identification effect of story perspective.

Why and under which conditions would people identify with similar and dissimilar others? Toolan (2001) included in his definition of narrative that the audience "learns" something from the protagonist's experiences. Perceived similarity can serve as a cue to the narrative lesson's relevance. Pinker (1997, p. 541) argued that when processing a story, audience members learn what happens to the protagonists and "mentally take notes on the outcomes of the strategies and tactics they use in pursuing their goals." This kind of learning by vicariously experiencing the consequences

of actions without having to actually suffer them has been invoked by many scholars as an explanation for why stories influence people's attitudes and behaviors (see, e.g., Kreuter et al., 2007; Slater, 2002). If this reasoning is correct, people identifying with similar characters makes sense. These characters operate in situations similar to the ones in which the audience might find itself, while pursuing goals the audience may find desirable as well. For instance, both law students and medical students may find themselves in a situation similar to the ones in which the lawyer and GP found themselves. Demographic similarities would be less indicative of relevance for audience members. However, one would expect demographic similarities to guide identification if they are relevant to the protagonist's goals. That is, gender or age would evoke identification in stories about gender- or age-related issues.

Although identifying with similar characters thus makes sense, the question is why a storytelling technique such as perspective can have us identify with dissimilar characters even when more similar characters are present? Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2014, p. 451) argued that identifying with a character can serve as a way to meet the "fundamental desire for at least temporary release from the effort of maintaining one's personal and social self, and for expansion beyond the constraints and limitations inherent in being that one particular set of human characteristics and social roles." They stated that stories are one of many means that can help achieve this goal next to others such as hobbies, religious experiences, and alcohol use.

Although the pleasure of this experience may be the reason for people to identify with characters, it may have more far reaching consequences as well. Several studies have shown that taking the perspective of a dissimilar other can reduce stigmatizing of an outgroup (Chung & Slater, 2013), make people receptive to opinions that appear to go against their own opinions and best interests (Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014), and can even temper attitudes toward controversial issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015). Identifying with characters with whom one would not normally identify may, therefore, reduce tensions and conflict between opposing groups.

A limitation of this study is that perceived similarity was manipulated in only one of many possible ways. In addition, the perceived similarity scores were not particularly high. In future research, it would be interesting to see whether tailoring a character to the characteristics of the audience would yield higher levels of perceived similarity and whether such higher levels of perceived similarity could override the impact of story perspective. A second limitation is its focus on written stories. Several studies have shown that identification plays an important role in audio-visual narratives as well (e.g., Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The question is whether there are storytelling techniques specific to the audiovisual realm that can be used to guide the identification process of the audience toward a particular character. And if there are such techniques, can they have the audience identify with a character even in the presence of other characters that are perceived as more similar by the audience?

In conclusion, the studies reported here, again, provide evidence for identification with a character serving as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. They also reveal that perceived similarity can influence identification. More importantly, they show that the strategic deployment of language can lead to people identifying with less similar characters even if there are more similar ones present in the story. This may be a very important function of language as it has people empathize with and care for characters they would normally not identify with. In essence, it can help people "to see things their way," and as a result may be able "to work it out," as the Beatles sang in 1965.

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Notes

1 Apart from the grammatical person, readers may be guided toward identification with the character whose perspective on the story events is represented, or in terms of Bal (1977): who focalizes the narrative. This character can be, but need not be represented as an "I"-character. There are numerous perspectivizing devices available to represent thoughts, perceptions, and emotions of third-person characters, varying from direct thought representation and free indirect mode that represent the character's consciousness from up close to implicit viewpoints that merely hint at the character's consciousness (Sanders & Redeker, 1996; Van Krieken, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2015).

2 The experimental materials are available from the first author.

3 A factor analysis for the items measuring identification with lawyer, identification with widow, similarity with lawyer, and similarity with widow revealed that these items loaded on four separate factors (80.86% explained variance).

4 Given that the main characters differed in gender, all analyses were also conducted with the participants' gender as an additional factor. Only the (main) effect of gender on attitude was significant (with female participants holding lower attitudes toward sentence reduction than male participants, $F(1, 112) = 5.08$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .043$)). No other significant main effects or interactions involving gender for any of the dependent variables were found.

5 The identical F-values are not a mistake but a result of obtaining the exact same means for the two comparisons. The standard deviations were slightly different but these differences were within the range of rounding error.

6 A factor analysis for the items measuring identification with lawyer, identification with widow, similarity with lawyer, and similarity with widow revealed that these items loaded on four separate factors (81.51% explained variance).

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