

PAPER SESSION 4: Empathy

PAPER 5

Enhancing empathic ability: Effects of exposure to literary fiction

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Life-time exposure to fiction has been found to be positively related to empathic ability (Mar et al., 2006). In addition, Kidd and Castano (2013) demonstrated that exposing participants specifically to literary fiction has a direct enhancing effect on empathic ability. As literary fiction is characterised by the presence of many ‘gaps’ that readers have to fill in to understand the narrative, literary texts likely make readers work harder to understand the author and character intentions and thereby train the reader’s empathic abilities in the process (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). However, it is currently not clear whether this aspect of literary fiction specifically is responsible for enhancing empathy. The present study thus aimed to determine whether adaptations of a literary text would still be effective in enhancing empathic ability if they required the reader to do less inferential work.

52 participants were presented either with a literary text in its unadapted form, in a partially adapted form (with the most complex inferences spelled out) or in a fully adapted form (with all necessary inferences made explicit) or they received a non-fiction text. Participants then completed an Author Recognition Test assessing their life-time exposure to fiction and two measures of empathic ability (assessing both cognitive and affective empathy). In contrast to previous research, empathy scores were not significantly higher for those who had read a literary text (in any version) as compared to the non-fiction text, nor were there any differences between versions of the literary text. However, life-time fiction exposure was found to be associated with higher empathy scores. Although the specific nature of the relationship between literary fiction and empathic ability thus could not be made more precise, the results of this study do underscore the relationship between long term exposure to fiction and empathic ability.