

Abstract

Reading and empathy have been empirically linked (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017; Van Lissa & Durren, 2016), with past findings showing reading can increase empathy. The Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) states that enjoyment of a story depends on valence of character morality (Raney et al., 2009). The current study adapted the ADT to literature by exploring how transportation, rather than enjoyment, into a story could impact participant's empathy toward immoral characters. Participants read one version of a short story in which the main character either engaged in moral behaviors (e.g., telling the truth) or immoral behaviors (e.g., lying) and experienced a difficult situation at the end of the story. Participants' state empathy was measured with 14 Likert scale questions (e.g., "I wanted different outcomes for the character"), their trait empathy was measured with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and their transportation was measured with 12 Likert scale questions. Participants liked the moral character more than the immoral character. Character liking was positively correlated with state empathy scores in both conditions. There was no significant positive correlation between transportation and state empathy, which is inconsistent with previous research (Johnson, 2012). The current study found that readers expressed higher levels of empathy for the moral character than the immoral character. The implications from this study suggest that type of character may have a positive *or* negative effect on empathy levels, and content of stories have a strong impact on empathetic development.

Keywords: reading, morality, characters, narrative empathy, trait empathy, transportation, Affective Disposition Theory

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