CultureCase

Reading fiction is related to developing empathic skills

This research was conducted by **P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp** at **VU University Amsterdam and FrieslandCampina, Deventer, The Netherlands**

Summary

This study reports two experiments designed to measure changes in readers' empathic skills over one week by getting participants to read either fiction or non-fiction writing. In the fiction groups, students were randomly allocated to read excerpts from work by either Arthur Conan Doyle or José Saramago. The two non-fiction groups were given newspaper articles to read. Immediately after reading the texts, subjects were assessed for emotional transportation. Empathy was measured directly before and after the experiment as well as one week later. Personal change was more likely to occur when becoming emotionally involved in the fictional story, and non-fiction readers were not similarly affected.

Fiction reading is related to empathic skills that develop over time

Results from the Conan Doyle study showed that fiction readers became more empathic over the course of a week than non-fiction readers, regardless of text difficulty, but only if they reported high emotional transportation into the story. Low transportation for fiction readers led to lower empathy but this was not observed in the non-fiction readers.

Lack of emotional transportation might have negative effects on fiction readers

The Saramago study replicated findings whereby absence of transportation was associated with decrease in empathy for fiction readers even after controlling for a number of factors. Surprisingly, non-fiction readers with high transportation reported a decrease in empathy. Also, women on average read more fictional books than men, as well as tending to report their empathic skills as being higher than their male counterparts. The authors suggest that it is not reading *per se* that affects empathic skills but the emotional involvement in the story

This summary is by **Anna Kolliakou, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

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