
Abstract: Understanding others’ mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies. Yet little research has investigated what fosters this skill, which is known as Theory of Mind (ToM), in adults. We present five experiments showing that reading literary fiction led to better performance on tests of affective ToM (experiments 1 to 5) and cognitive ToM (experiments 4 and 5) compared with reading nonfiction (experiments 1), popular fiction (experiments 2 to 5), or nothing at all (experiments 2 and 5). Specifically, these results show that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances ToM. More broadly, they suggest that ToM may be influenced by engagement with works of art.


Abstract: Readers of fiction tend to have better abilities of empathy and theory of mind (Mar et al., 2006). We present a study designed to replicate this finding, rule out one possible explanation, and extend the assessment of social outcomes. In order to rule out the role of personality, we first identified Openness as the most consistent correlate. This trait was then statistically controlled for, along with two other important individual differences: the tendency to be drawn into stories and gender. Even after accounting for these variables, fiction exposure still predicted performance on an empathy task. Extending these results, we also found that exposure to fiction was positively correlated with social support. Exposure to nonfiction, in contrast, was associated with loneliness, and negatively related to social support.


Abstract: Fiction literature has largely been ignored by psychology researchers because its only function seems to be entertainment, with no connection to empirical validity. We argue that literary narratives have a more important purpose. They offer models or simulations of the social world via abstraction, simplification, and compression. Narrative fiction also creates a deep and immersive simulative experience of social interactions for readers. This simulation facilitates the communication and understanding of social information and makes it more compelling, achieving a form of learning through experience. Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference.


Abstract: Fiction simulates the social world and invites us into the minds of characters. This has led various researchers to suggest that reading fiction improves our understanding of others’ cognitive and emotional states. Kidd and Castano (2013) received a great deal of attention by providing support for this claim. Their article reported that reading segments of literary fiction (but not popular fiction or nonfiction) immediately and significantly improved performance on the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), an advanced theory-of-mind test. Here we report a replication attempt by 3 independent research groups, with 792 participants randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions (literary fiction, popular fiction, nonfiction, and no reading). In contrast to Kidd and Castano (2013), we found no significant advantage in RMET scores for literary fiction compared to any of the other conditions. However, as in Kidd and Castano and previous research, the Author Recognition Test, a measure of lifetime exposure to fiction, consistently predicted RMET scores across conditions. We conclude that the most plausible link between reading fiction and theory of mind is either that individuals with strong theory of mind are drawn to fiction and/or that a lifetime of reading gradually strengthens theory of mind, but other variables, such as verbal ability, may also be at play.

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