Research Network:

Feeling and Understanding. The Role of Empathic Emotions in Understanding Persons and Literature

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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Could we understand the contribution of reading fiction on the development of social cognition when we study the influence of empathy on reading literature?

Scholars from both the humanities and the science agree that reading is a basic prerequisite to participate fully in society. Moreover, especially reading literary texts seems to contribute significantly to the development of social cognition like empathy and Theory of Mind. As empirical demonstrated, the exposure to literature seems to cause better performance on Theory of Mond tests and seems to increase self reported empathy (e.g. Ball & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). A recently published meta analysis of 14 studies reported a small but statistically significant effect indicating that fiction readers outperformed nonfiction or no readers on social– cognitive tasks (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018). The authors of this meta analysis concluded that the current results "help to resolve the debate over whether fiction reading improves social cognition" (p. 1724). Nevertheless, they also stressed the point that "we still do not know how fiction reading improves social cognition, and what factors may influence this association" (p. 1724). Within the talk, I will explore whether our understanding of the positive link between literary reading and empathy could benefit from research focusing on the role of empathy during reading and reflecting on literary texts.

According to Oatley (2016) reading fiction practice social-cognitive skills because it involves repeated simulation of social-cognitive processes and helps to transfer concrete knowledge about human psychology and social interaction. Keen (2006) assumed that the positive outcomes to social cognition may depend on the how intensive a reader engages with a text and how good he or she understand the characters (Keen, 2006). Both aspects are discussed as key components within the comprehension process of literary texts and may rely on trait driven patterns of empathy. For example, Gerrig and Foy (2013) proposed that the alignment of reader's own emotional states with those of the protagonist is essential for story comprehension. It may help distinguish important from less important information (Dyer, 1983) which fosters the building of a coherent situation model of the text. Empirical studies about the influence of trait driven patterns of empathy on readers experiences during reading and text understanding are rare. For nine graders Henschel and Roick (2013) reported that empathy could explain up to 10 % of variance observed understanding of literary texts. More precisely, especially emotional fantasy empathy correlates with literary text comprehension. Gerrig, Bagelmann, and Mumper (2016) tested how facets of trait empathy were associated with reader's transportation for adults reading literary texts. As for watching films (Hall & Bracken, 2011), again emotional fantasy empathy predicted transportation but had no influence on enjoyment after controlling for transportation. The within the talk presented reanalysis of three own datasets on reading different extracts of literary texts replicated that especially emotional fantasy empathy predicts transportation and related constructs like suspense and emotional

engagement. In contrast to the result of Henschel and Roick (2013), self reported understanding seems not to rely on emotional fantasy empathy and also not on other facets of trait empathy measured with the German version of the IRI (Paulus, 2009).

The goal of the talk is to stimulate a discussion about further empirical studies which not only replicate the positive relationship of emotion fantasy empathy and emotional engagement while reading literary texts but focussed on possible effects of empathy on understanding and possible longer lasting (self-) reflections. Both could be a key component to further explain the positive influence of reading fiction on the development of social cognition.

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