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The impact of narratives and transportation on empathic responding

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Abstract

Research suggests that experiencing narratives may be a way to change empathic responding to others (e.g. Paluck, 2009) but less is known about the impact of narratives on empathic responding towards people who are traditionally disliked (i.e. non-positive role models such as offenders). It is known that the ability to express empathy is an important factor in working effectively with a variety of disadvantaged groups (Serran & Marshall, 2010). The current research investigated the mechanisms predicting empathic responding to an offender. Participants read either a narrative or non-narrative text before completing questionnaires measuring: perceived similarity to, and identification with, the protagonist; transportation; and self-reported empathy. A final measure recorded the extent to which empathic questions were selected for use in an interview with a different offender. Regression analysis showed that transportation mediated the effect of narrative intervention on the degree to which empathic questions were selected. Narrative transportation may facilitate empathic responding to traditionally disliked or blamed groups.

Keywords: identity, narrative, empathy, reading, transportation

1. Introduction

Our regular experience of engaging with stories, through films, books, games and television is valuable as a means of entertainment and distraction from daily life. It is proposed here, however, that experiencing stories may also be able to profoundly affect our beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014). Stories are argued to be important because they provide simulations of the social world, allowing us to practice important social processing skills (Oatley, 1999). It is possible that this social simulation through narrative may increase compassion and pro-social behaviour towards others (Koopman, 2015) and may, therefore, be an important factor in improving empathic responses towards marginalised groups, or even towards people who are traditionally disliked.

Research has explored the potential persuasive and positive impacts of narratives, such as reducing prejudice (Paluck, 2009), increasing life satisfaction (Gabriel & Young, 2011), changing attitudes (e.g.Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016; Lewis & Sznitman, 2017), altering behavioural intentions (Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013), encouraging engagement with global issues (Chattoo & Feldman, 2017) and increasing social skills (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Of more direct relevance to the current study, a growing body of research, drawn from a variety of disciplines including psychology, communications, media studies, and literary studies, has suggested that experiencing narratives may (under some conditions) facilitate changes in empathy (e.g. Paluck, 2009; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Djikic, Oatley & Moldoveanu, 2013, Koopman, 2015).

1.1 Empathy

Keen (2006. p. 214) has argued that "Human beings, like other primates, tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us". The question of interest in this research paper is whether narratives may also allow an improvement in empathic responding to individuals who may be a) unlike us; b) prototypically less likely to

be supported according to societal norms, i.e. non-positive role models; and c) held as being accountable for their own life outcomes.

Whilst not drawn from narrative research, there is some research evidence suggesting that it might be possible to improve empathic responding to non-positive role models. For example, Batson et al. (1997) and Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland (2002) found those induced to feel empathy towards (among others) murderers and drug addicts reported more positive feelings and attitudes to other members of the same stigmatised groups.

The idea that narrative interventions may be able to influence empathic responding was supported by Oliver, Dillard, Bae and Tamul (2012) who compared news story format (either narrative, i.e. centred around a specific person, or non-narrative, i.e. centred around a specific policy) regarding three different marginalised groups (immigrants, prisoners, and the elderly). They found that stories in a narrative format had a positive effect on empathic attitudes due to an indirect effect of compassion. Whilst interesting, this study only tested situations in which the cause of the problem faced was not attributed to the 'stigmatised' group. They were stigmatised individuals, but not as a result of actions they themselves had taken.

By employing narratives about adultery, Hakemulder (2000) was able to test a behavior attributed to the protagonist. Literary narratives regarding adultery were re-written to be told either from the first person, or from the perspective of other characters (the study also used a factual control condition comprising a text not related to adultery). Whilst in one story tested the first-person perspective of the narrator made readers more lenient in their morality scale ratings, the ability of participants to generate explanations for adulterous behaviours (used as a proxy for empathy) were not altered by either the use of story (versus control), or by the narrators' perspective.

There are many reasons why empathic responses to disliked people may be important and one practical illustration can be drawn from working with offenders. Within forensic psychology empathic responses frequently emerge as an important factor in successful engagement with offenders. For example, empathic responding is considered important for successful outcomes in therapeutic relationships (Serran & Marshall, 2010), investigative interviews (Alison, Alison, Noone, Elntib & Christiansen, 2013) and hostage negotiations (Vecchi, Van Hasselt & Romano, 2005). Empathy towards ex-offenders may also be important in their rehabilitation within the community (Stevenson, Malik, Totton, & Reeves, 2015). For the current study, the authors have tested responses to a person engaged in criminal activity as a way of exploring the mechanisms which might predict empathic responding to a non-positive role model.

Due to the wide variety of academic disciplines involved in this emerging research, empathy is defined and subsequently measured in myriad ways. Some researchers (e.g. Batson, et al., 1997) have drawn on definitions based on other related constructs such as sympathy and compassion. They define empathy as "an other-oriented emotional response congruent with another's perceived welfare; if the other is oppressed or in need, empathic feelings include sympathy, compassion, tenderness and the like" (Batson et al, 1997, p.105). Psychologists tend to define empathy as both a cognitive and emotional skillset. For example, a "cognitive and intellectual ability to recognise the emotions of other persons and to emotionally respond to other persons" (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p.2).

Corresponding to the variety of definitions, the measures of empathy utilised in the research literature are similarly diverse. Whilst this variety of definition and measurement allows the many academic disciplines with an interest in this area to borrow the best ideas from one another, and highlights the complexity of empathy as a concept, it does cloud the issue of what exactly empathy is and makes comparisons across the literature problematic.

Given this variety it is important to give a clear definition of what the present researchers consider empathy to be. Derived from the Greek words empatheia—em (into) and pathos (feeling) (Jamieson, 2014), empathy is an imaginative process which allows individuals to psychologically experience someone else's cognitive perspective and emotional state, whilst critically still maintaining a sense of their own identity as separate (Coplan, 2014). This self-other differentiation means that empathy differs from identification (imaginatively 'becoming' another character without self-other differentiation) and emotional contagion (the tendency to converge emotionally with another person, without perspective taking or imagination) (Coplan, 2014).

1.2 Theoretical Models

The empathy-attitude model (Batson et al.,1997) suggests that putting oneself in the world of the target person, and considering how they are affected by their circumstances, should increase empathy, which in turn should increase welfare concerns for the target person and additionally generalise to other individuals in the same situation. Whilst not a theory specifically based on narrative ideas there is some evidence that this effect can be achieved via narrative means. Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland (2002) showed that participants induced to feel empathy towards a heroin addict were more positive towards other drug addicts even if they were told the drug addict was fictional as opposed to real.

Accepting the idea that in empathy there is self-other differentiation, as Coplan (2014) states, then theoretically there should not be a problem with feeling empathic, even to someone who is a non-positive role model because critically the reader maintains a sense of themselves as separate from the person they read about. This allows the reader to imagine or model the character's desires and regrets (which in the real world might be inaccessible to them) whilst having different ones themselves. And this self-other differentiation should

allow empathy even towards a character who we may, on the face of it, judge as having behaved badly.

Support for the idea that, when faced with a narrative, people may respond positively to characters even if they see them as being 'bad' comes from affective disposition theory or ADT (Raney, 2011), which suggests that individuals derive enjoyment/appreciation from their emotional connections with fictional characters, and the narrative outcomes that befall them. Raney (2011), like Marr and Oatley (2008) points out that through fictional experience we can expand the cast of people with whom we "interact" to include the types of people we may never meet, or indeed chose to spend time with, in real life. Reading about such individuals allows us the opportunity to understand them without the need for direct contact. Importantly, according to ADT, because they are fictional need to be entertained outweighs the need to morally scrutinise protagonists as we would in real life.

1.3 Psychological Mechanisms

Whilst much of the research in this area still focuses on narratives in films and television, it has been argued that literary narratives may have a stronger impact than these more passive media on attitude and behavioural change. Mar, Oatley, Djikic, and Mullin (2011) discuss two major reasons for this: 1) reading requires a high level of cognitive involvement than more passive forms of entertainment, such as television or film viewing; and 2) reading is paced by the reader, and often takes more time than the relatively short exposures to a film or television programme.

Due to their persuasive effects, researchers have been keen to investigate the mechanisms which underpin how narratives are experienced (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014). There are two key mechanisms thought to be central to individuals' experiences of narratives, transportation and identification. Transportation is defined as "the state of feeling cognitively, emotionally and imaginatively immersed in a narrative world" (Sestir & Green, 2010, p. 275).

Identification is "a process whereby viewers vicariously take the place of a media character and react to his or her experiences as if they were happening to the viewer" (Sestir & Green, 2010, p.274). As such, transportation is thought of as being swept along with a story, such that absorption and immersion focus the reader on the story rather than the readers 'real' environment (Oliver, Dillard, Bae & Tamul, 2012). This intensely active form of engagement reduces the need and ability to counterargue messages presented in the story (Green and Brock, 2000). Identification centers around one particular character, and includes lessening the differentiation between the self and the character being read about (Djikic, Oatley & Moldoveanu, 2013).

Previous research that has explored transportation has generally shown it has an important role in producing empathy. Highly transported individuals have been found to be more empathic after a week than their counterparts who were less transported (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). Banerjee and Green (2013) showed transportation to affect both cognitive and affective responses towards intended alcohol use. Johnson (2012) found participants who were more transported into a story were more likely to experience affective empathy and to engage in pro-social behaviour (helping someone pick up pens after they dropped them) with the effect remaining even after trait empathy and the tendency to become absorbed into a story had been controlled for. The research in this area is somewhat equivocal, however, as some researchers (e.g. Kidd & Castano 2013; Koopman, 2015) have found no mediating effect of transportation on empathy, although a recent meta-analyses of 287 effect sizes (Van Laer, Ruyter, Visconsi Wetzels, 2013) showed that transportation had a large significant effect on affective responses. In addition, this meta-analyses showed that more transported individuals tended to be less engaged in critical thoughts.

Identification has been less clearly linked to empathy specifically but has been shown to mediate the impact of story perspective on sentencing decisions towards offenders

(Hoeken, Kolthoff & Sanders, 2016). High identification has been shown to increase the likelihood of adopting the perceived character traits of media characters (Sestir and Green, 2010), as well as adopting more favourable attitudes and behaviours to a character in an outgroup (Kaufman and Libby, 2012). Little is currently known about why and how people identify with characters, but most theories suggest identification to be underpinned by similarity and liking (Black, Helmy, Robson & Barnes, 2019). There is some research evidence that when presented with bad characters, identification increases appreciation (i.e. liking, or finding the character interesting) (Konijn and Hoorn, 2005), and that the degree of exposure to the story world may play a role in identifying with villains (Sanders and Tsay-Vogel, 2016) although the exact relationship with empathy remains unclear.

A related construct to identification is the idea of assimilation; i.e. the degree to which a person feels like they 'become' the character they read about. This concept has previously been studied in relation to both groups of people (e.g. Gabriel & Young's [2011, p. 990] "narrative collective- assimilation hypothesis") and individuals (e.g. Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008). It was found that individuals who read about vampires actually assimilated some of their traits, for example, believing that their teeth were longer (Gabriel and Young, 2011), and that people primed by writing about a favourite celebrity, actually become closer to their ideal self (Derrick et al., 2008).

To summarise, a body of research suggests that narratives may have an important function in improving empathic responding towards others, and that these effects may be mediated by mechanisms such as transportation, identification and assimilation. However, the target characters for empathic responding presented in the research literature to date have tended to be either simply outgroup members, or perhaps victims of circumstance (e.g. medical patients). The current research explores whether empathic responding can still be

improved even when the protagonist is from a traditionally disliked or non-positive group such as those who engage in criminal activity.

2. Method

2.1 Hypothesis

The current study considers the impact of a narrative versus non narrative reading intervention on empathic responding towards another similar type of offender (in the form of the selection of empathic 'police interview' questions). The hypothesis is that empathic behaviour (the degree to which empathic questions are selected for use in an interview with a hypothetical offender) will be predicted by type of reading intervention (narrative/non-narrative), transportation, identification, assimilation, and self-reported empathy.

2.2 Participants

Participants were invited to participate during a one-hour session, in a study that they were told concerned reactions to media representations of criminals and measures of personality. The convenience sample comprised 240 undergraduate students studying a psychology module at a University in the North of England. Their mean age was 21 years (SD=1.83). 201 of the participants were female, 32 were male and 7 participants did not note their gender.

2.3 Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to participants on paper and were completed in silence. Participants were allocated to either the 'narrative' or 'non-narrative' reading conditions arbitrarily. Transportation into the text, identification with the protagonist, and empathy were measured using pre-existing self-report scales. Assimilation (perceived similarity to the protagonist) was measured using a scale created by the authors, based on existing research. Once the reading intervention was complete, participants were presented with a short hypothetical crime scenario about a male offender who had used drugs, stolen from a shopping centre, and been violent upon arrest. Participants were presented with a range of possible interview questions that could be used with the offender in the hypothetical crime

scenario (empathic, neutral or non-empathic techniques/questions), and were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would use each question.

2.4 Materials

The main manipulation related to the presentation of a reading intervention; either a narrative or a non-narrative account. In the narrative condition, two chapters from Rachel's Holiday (2012) by Marian Keyes were used. This is a novel about a young woman who experiences difficulties in her life relating to drug use and associated behaviours (such as stealing and deceiving friends). In the non-narrative condition, participants read a non-fictional account. To create this, the researchers wrote a newspaper article version of the same information as was presented in the narrative condition (e.g. information about a drug user), and this was presented to participants as a factual newspaper article.

2.4.1 Self-report measures.

2.4.1.1 Empathy. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davies, 1983) is a 28-item scale used to measure self-reported empathy. This was selected due to its ability to measure both cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy. This scale incorporates four subscales each with seven items, and each measuring a different facet of empathy: personal distress (e.g., "I tend to lose control during emergencies"), empathic concern (e.g., "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen"), fantasy (e.g., " I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel"), and perspective taking (e.g., " I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision"). Participants responded to each item on a scale of 0 (does not describe me well) to 4 (describes me very well). This measure was given to participants after the reading intervention and so measured self-reported empathy after reading. Cronbach's alpha for each subscale was good: empathic concern ($\propto$ = .82), fantasy scale ($\propto$ = .83), perspective taking ($\propto$= .84), personal distress ($\propto$ = .76). These are

comparable with previous research, which has demonstrated good reliability and validity for this measure (e.g., Davis, 1983).

2.4.1.2 Identification was measured using the three item identification scale developed by Sestir and Green (2010). The measure focused on how participants related to the protagonist in both conditions, and included statements such as "When good things happened to her I felt happy, but when negative things happened to her, I felt sad". Participants responded to these items on a 7-point scale. Cronbach's alpha showed good reliability ($\propto$ = .78), comparable to Sestir and Green's (2010) original research ($\propto$ = .79).

2.4.1.3 Transportation was measured using an 8-item scale developed by Sestir and Green (2010) which used 8 items from Green and Brocks (2000) original 15 item scale (e.g. "I could picture myself in the scene of the events that I was reading about"). Participants responded on the same Likert scale as for the identification measure. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was good ($\propto$ = .77) and comparable to the Cronbach's alpha for the original 15-item version of the scale ($\propto$ = .76; Green & Brock, 2000).

2.4.1.4 Assimilation. A measure of assimilation (i.e. the extent to which the person actually 'becomes' or assumes the identity of the protagonist) was created by the researchers, and adapted from an assimilation measure used by Gabriel and Young (2011). Gabriel and Young measured assimilation with a group identity. The present research explored this same idea, but attempted to measure assimilation with a single person. Assimilation items were developed that were considered relevant to an individual involved in criminal drug use. For example: "Compared to the average person, I engage in more risky behaviour" and "I have a more addictive personality than the average person". These items were included alongside filler items (e.g., " I am more enthusiastic than the average person"). Participants responded on a 7-item Likert scale. A total assimilation score was created by summing responses to the

five assimilation items. The Cronbach's alpha for the newly created assimilation measure was $\propto = .61$. This is comparable with the alphas in Gabriel & Young's research.

2.4.2 Interview questions and strategies. In the next section of the questionnaire, all participants were presented with a hypothetical written scenario about a male offender who had stolen to fund a drug habit, and who was violent on arrest. Following this, a range of questions and statements were provided for participants to respond to (20 items in total). Participants were asked to imagine they were the interviewing officer and to indicate how likely it was that they would use each question or statement when interviewing the suspect. Questioning techniques were created to be either empathic (10 items; e.g., " John I understand that the situation you find yourself in in this interview must be very difficult for you, and I am happy to give you time to consider your responses so please do not rush."), non-empathic (4 items; e.g., " John, I have interviewed a lot of addicts in my time and I can tell when they are lying, so don't think you can get past me", or neutral (6 items; e.g., "What time did you leave the house this morning John, to set off [to the shopping centre]?"). Participants indicated how likely they would be to use each of these techniques on a seven point likert scale. Responses to the empathic questioning techniques were summed to create a total score, with a higher score indicating more empathic responding ($\propto = .69$).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics showing the means and standard deviations of empathy [IRI score], assimilation, identification, transportation, and empathic questions are shown in Table 1. These statistics are organised by narrative condition, because participants completed all these questionnaires after the reading intervention was complete.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Transportation and selection of empathic questioning were significantly higher in the narrative condition (see Table 1), but there were no differences between the narrative and

non-narrative conditions in self-reported empathy or in the extent to which participants felt they identified with or assimilated to the character in the narrative. This suggests that participants who read a narrative, as opposed to a non-narrative account, felt greater transportation and were more likely to select empathic questions.

To test the hypothesis that the participants increased selection of empathic questions occurred via the mechanisms of assimilation, transportation, identification, and self-reported empathy, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Thus empathic questioning served as the criterion variable, the established effect of narrative condition was the independent variable for the first step, levels of self-reported empathy (measured by the IRI) were included in the second step, and assimilation, transportation and identification effects of the reading intervention in the final step. The results of this regression, shown in Table 2, indicate that after controlling for the effect of the reading intervention (narrative/non-narrative accounts), self-reported empathy is a strong predictor of empathic questioning, and remains so in the final model into which all variables are entered. Of the remaining variables, only transportation retains its unique prediction of empathic questioning. Variance that can be uniquely attributed to the manipulation of narrative is effectively zero in the final step. As the effect of the type of reading intervention (narrative versus non-narrative condition) was barely altered from step one to step two, but eradicated in step three, the inference is that transportation mediated the effect of this experimental manipulation.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

An indirect effect test was therefore conducted, to investigate whether the effect of narrative on empathic questioning was routed via Transportation. We included the post-reading intervention variables Empathy and Assimilation as other potential mediators to investigate whether Transportation provided a unique indirect effect. Identification was omitted as there was no association between this and empathic questioning. Participants who

read the narrative version were more likely to experience transportation than those who read a non-narrative version ($a = 5.81$), and those who experienced higher levels of transportation were more likely to ask empathic questions ($b_1 = 0.29$). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of narrative condition through transportation ($ab_1 = 1.67$) was above zero (0.77 to 2.87). The analysis indicated there were no indirect effects of narrative through either assimilation ($ab_2 = 0.12$, CI -.07 to 0.63) or state self-reported empathy ($ab_3 = 0.27$, CI -0.21 to 0.99). There was no evidence for a direct effect of narrative condition on empathic questioning ($c = 0.12$, CI = -1.91 to 2.16).

4. Discussion

It was found that transportation mediated the effect of the reading intervention on the selection of empathic interview questions. Participants who read a narrative (as opposed to a non-narrative) account about an offender were more likely to feel transported, and highly transported participants were more likely to select empathic questions to ask another offender who had committed similar crimes.

These results suggest that narratives can alter empathic responses to non-positive role models who are responsible for their own fate and builds on prior research (e.g. Koopman, 2015) that has considered the impact of narratives on psychologically stigmatised groups (i.e. those suffering from depression and grief) and further extends the work of Oliver, Dillard, Bae and Tamul (2012) who considered other disadvantaged groups (prisoners, the elderly and immigrants). By specifically exploring empathy, the present research also builds on the work of Lewis and Sznitman (2017) who studied attitude change via the stories of those with stigmatised illnesses they were seen as culpable for contracting. Counter to the findings of Hakemulder (2000), who failed to find that participants could generate more explanations for adultery following a reading intervention, the current findings suggest narratives can improve empathic responding even when the protagonist of the story is portrayed as culpable for wrong doing.

In the present research assimilation of the characteristics of the protagonist did not take place in the fictional condition, instead those in the fictional condition assimilated with the character slightly (although not significantly) less than those in the factual. Assimilation also did not contribute uniquely to empathic questioning. This suggests that self-other differentiation (Coplan, 2014) was maintained even when readers were transported. While the research did not aim to specifically test affective disposition theory the findings lend support to the proposition that reading enables readers to enjoy characters without moral scrutinty, but also allows them to maintain a separate sense of self. As Raney (2011) suggests, fiction facilitates spending time with non-positive role models, whilst allowing acceptance of their bad behaviour.

The research also supports the suggestion by Batson et al. (1997), and Batson at al. (2002) that empathy for one person can generalise from one target individual (the one read about) to others from the same group. While Batson et al. did not utilise a narrative intervention, in the present study a narrative intervention facilitated empathic responding generalizing from the protagonist read about to another offender who carried out similar behaviours (i.e. the intended recipient of the questions). This is an important development with pragmatic implications. If applying the use of narrative as an intervention to improve empathic responding towards a particular group, whether the reader feels empathy towards the person they read about is only of theoretical relevance. The really important outcome is whether or not they then subsequently chose to behave more empathically to another similar person they subsequently encounter in real life.

Interestingly, in the current study the vignette contained offending behaviours that were far worse than the behavior presented in the extracts from the fictional narrative. In the vignette developed by the researchers the offender was arrested for a high value theft, was violent upon arrest, absconded, and harmed an elderly lady, and yet the empathic response

towards this character was still observed for those who were highly transported during the reading intervention. It was not the purpose of the present study to test to what degree the empathic response could be 'pushed' to increasingly more challenging negative behaviours, however this might be an interesting avenue for future study.

The role of transportation was found to be the important mediator in our study. This finding supports other researchers who also presented evidence of a central role for transportation in various types of empathy development (including helping behaviours [Johnson, 2012]; self-reported empathic feelings [Bal & Veltkamp, 2013]; political attitudes [Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016]; and intended alcohol related behaviour [Banerjee & Greene, 2013]). The present study, however, differed slightly in that it measured empathic intentions towards a specific (non- positive) other, and so it is interesting to note the role of transportation in altering behavior towards other non-positive role models specifically.

It would appear likely, as has been suggested by other researchers (e.g. Bae, Lee & Bae, 2014) that transportation facilitates an individual's processing of persuasive messages in a qualitatively different way than they would process factual information. As suggested by Van Laer, Ruyter, Visconsi Wetzels, 2013) increased transportation seems to lead to less critical evaluation. The research supports the idea that the desire to enjoy the story overrides the need to evaluate the arguments cognitively and protect the self against persuasion.

It is perhaps unsurprising that while other researchers have found identification to be an important factor, in the present research this was not found to be the case. Kaufman and Libby (2012) found that behavioural change was more likely when reading about in-group rather than out-group characters, and the present research suggests that empathic change is also not happening through identification. Possibly this may be due to the limited amount of exposure to the story world that was presented in this research (Sanders and Tsay- Vogel, 2016). Further research could test this possibility.

The implications of the study are that reading a narrative about one non-positive role model can improve empathic reactions to other, similar individuals. This result could be important for improving relationships in many areas of society, without the need for direct contact. For example, it may be possible to improve empathic responses from interviewers towards suspects during investigative interviews, or towards immigrants by community members, simply by delivering an intervention that would be perceived as entertainment.

Some potential limitations of the present study are noted. The current study is limited to an undergraduate sample and delivered in an academic context and needs to be replicated amongst relevant practitioner samples. Additionally, the research is limited by its 'paper and pencil' nature and tests a single (rather than multiple) narrative versus non narrative intervention (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983). Participants were only asked to select potential interview questions (including empathic questioning) from a list they were provided with, rather than researchers being able to observe whether and how empathy was expressed in real interactions. This means that like much other research in this area, the research measures intentions rather than real world behavior. That said, the study provides an interesting proof of concept that suggests it is possible that empathic responses to non-positive role models may be improved by a reading intervention.

A further consideration for the eventual application of this research would be how any "real life" interventions would be presented to practitioners. In the present research the study was presented to students as considering their reactions to media representations of criminals alongside measuring aspects of their personality. In so doing, participants were given no indication that this study formed an intervention. This was only revealed to them during the debriefing stage, after the study was completed. The presentation of the intervention could potentially be critical as it may be that participants would have responded differently had they

known about the intervention. For this reason the way in which any reading initiatives were presented to practitioners, or community members, would be critical.

The present research suggests that by reading about a non-positive role model, who is responsible for their own reprehensible behavior, we may be able to influence individual's subsequent empathic reactions towards other similar individuals. This may form a parsimonious intervention through increasing understanding and empathic responding in areas where increased empathic responding between groups of disliked individuals may be beneficial, such as within the criminal justice system, within people with differing religious ideologies, or any other sector of society where increased empathic responding may lead to more positive outcomes. Whilst further studies should be carried out in this area, it appears that there is some promise for a potential low-cost intervention that may both entertain and achieve positive outcomes for individuals within society.

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6. Tables

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Empathic Questions, Empathy, Identification, Assimilation and Transportation.

Reading Condition	Non-narrative (n = 117)		Narrative (n = 118)		t
	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Range	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Range	
Empathic questions	42.63 (*7.76*)	22-64	44.84 (*8.83*)	23-64	2.13*
Empathy	69.28 (*13.22*)	41-98	70.81 (*11.95*)	41-95	0.94 *ns*
Identification	11.91 (*3.523*)	3-19	12.44 (*4.29*)	3-21	1.05 *ns*
Transportation	33.73 (*7.77*)	16-53	39.45 (*6.60*)	25-54	6.15**
Assimilation	15.50 (*4.77*)	5-27	14.94 (*4.13*)	5-26	0.96 *ns*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, *ns* non-significant

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Empathic Questioning.

	R^2 change	F Change	df	β
Step one	.02	4.49*	1, 234	
Reading condition				.14*
Step two	.15	42.90**	1, 233	
Reading condition				.11
Empathy				.39**
Step three	.05	4.88**	3, 230	
Reading condition				.02
Empathy				.25**
Identification				.02
Transportation				.27**
Assimilation				-.11

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, *ns* non-significant