How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation

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Contents

1.Abstract

This study examined whether **fiction reading** has an effect on the reader's **empathy** by conducting two experimental studies. The researchers predicted that if readers read **fiction** and they were **emotionally transported** into the story, then they would become **more emphatic**. The participants self-reported by filling out several scales after reading either the fiction or the non-fiction text. The results indicated that their **hypothesis was supported** and that empathy was influenced for over a period of one week. No effect was found for non-fiction (control condition) readers.

2. Introduction

- Reading books is one of the activities that people perform in their daily lives
- Fictional narrative experience may affect how people feel in their daily lives (e.g., providing personal insights)
- Fiction is correlated with empathy
- Question: Does **reading fiction** really cause to **higher empathy** or is it that highly emotional people tend to read more fiction?

Reference: Oatley K (2002) Emotions and the story world of fiction. In Green MC, Strange JJ, Brock TC, editors. Narrative Impact. Social and Cognitive Foundations. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum. 39–70.

3. Hypothesis

Reading **fiction** is **correlated** with **empathy**, as long as the reader is **emotionally transported** into the text.

4. Methods

Materials

- Computer

Study 1

- Fiction: *The Adventures of the Six Napoleons* by Arthur Conan Doyle
- Control: *De Volkskrant*, the Dutch newspaper

Study 2

- Fiction: *Blindness* by José Saramago
- Control: *NRC Handelsblad,* the Dutch newspaper

4. Methods

Materials

- Scale from ***Busselle and Bilandzic*** (emotional transportation)
- The empathic concern scale of **Davis** (empathy)
- Scales from **Djikic** et al. (positive emotions and negative emotions)
- ***Narrative Understanding scale*** (comprehension)
- ***Attentional Focus scale*** (attention)

4. Methods

Participants

Study 1

- 66 Dutch undergraduate students
  - 36 fiction, 30 control
  - 52% female

Study 2

- 97 Dutch undergraduate students
  - 50 fiction, 47 control
  - 74% female
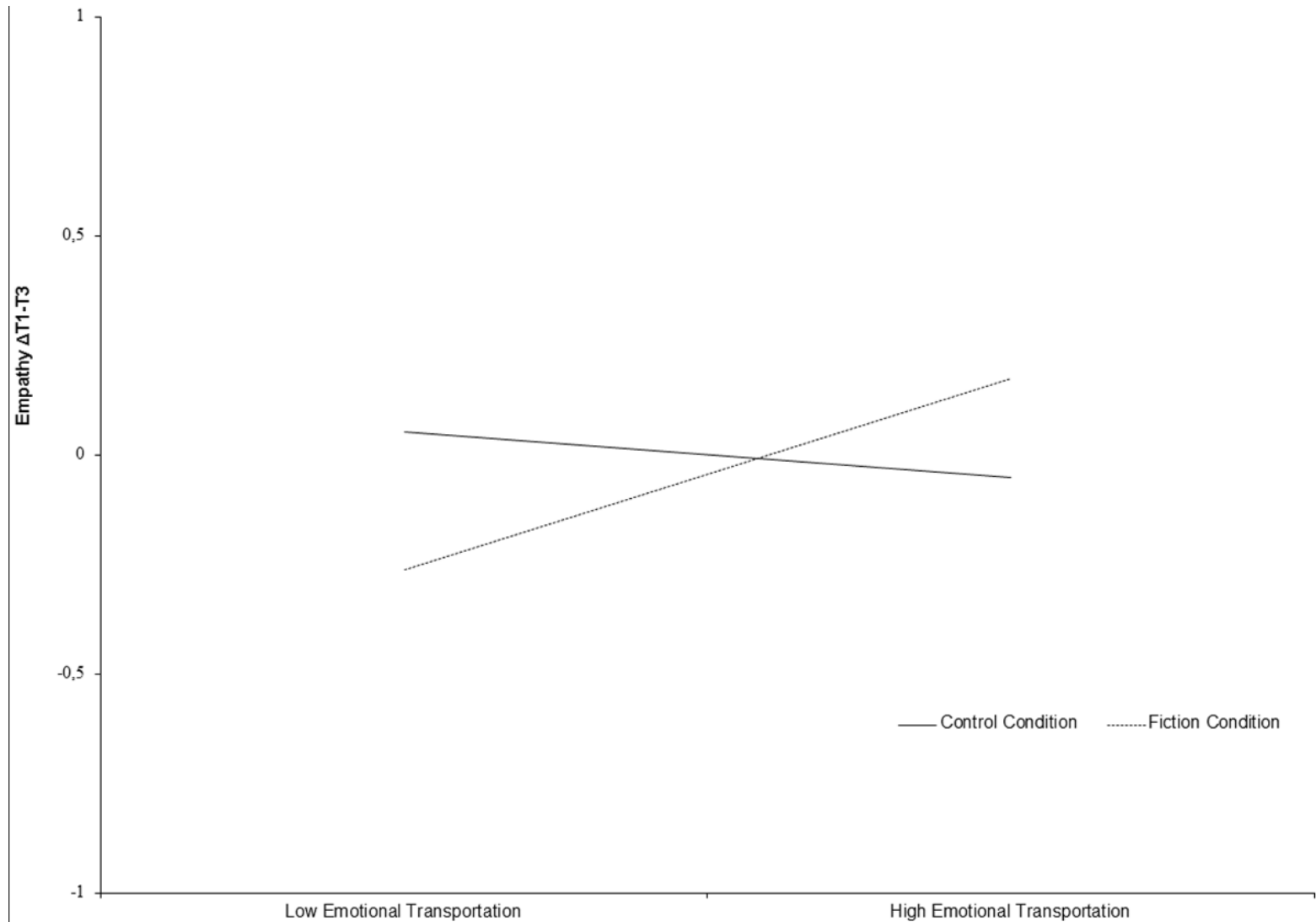
4. Methods

Procedure
- In T1: Demographic variables, a range of study irrelevant scales, the empathy scale
- Read either newspaper/fictional book for one week
- In T2: self-report
  - Study 2: controlled for positive and negative emotions
- Write down summary
- In T3: fill out digital questionnaire, the empathy scale, irrelevant scales

5. Results

Study 1

- Empathy (T1) was a strong predictor of empathy (T3) ($p < 0.01$).
- Narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional transportation were unrelated to empathy (T3).
- Low transportation, low empathy (fiction)
  - Hypothesis supported

5. Results

5. Results

Study 2

- Narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional transportation were **unrelated** to empathy (T3).
- While readers became lower in empathy, when transportation **increased** somewhat, empathy **increased** as well (**fiction**)
- Readers who were **low** in transportation, the effect was **negative** (**non-fiction**)
  - Hypothesis partially supported

6. Discussion

- In Study 1, empathy was enhanced
- In Study 2, low transportation led to lower empathy
- Effects not attributed to difficulty of texts and positive or negative emotions