Different Stories: How Literary and Popular Genre Fiction Relate to Folk Psychology and Folk Sociology

Jake Pemberton is a spacecraft pilot. Called one night, he quickly cancels a date with his wife, Phyllis, and heads out on a rocket. A number of brusque interactions later, the space agency’s psychiatrist’s pronouncement that he is “a little more antisocial than his past record shows” confirms the reader’s suspicions about his character. Jake’s mood only brightens at the end of his adventure when, rewarded for his expert flying, he is offered a desirable job based in outer space. His wife agrees without hesitation to leave Kansas to join him there, prompting him to at last question “why he ever doubted her.” Jake Pemberton’s relatively static character does not do much to make The Space Jockey by Robert Heinlein interesting. The intricacies of future space travel and his daring set of catastrophe-avoiding maneuvers do.

Now, consider a different character. Corrie is a young woman who engages in a long-term affair with a married architect, Howard. Over several years, she transforms from a sarcastic, globe-trotting daughter of a shoe manufacturer into a somewhat aloof volunteer at her small Ontarian town’s neglected library. Along the way, she copes with her father’s illness and death, the shuttering of her family’s shoe factory, and a blackmail scheme purportedly orchestrated by Sadie, her former maid. After Sadie dies, Corrie comes to suspect the architect of lying about the threatened blackmail and pocketing her payments. The story, Corrie by Alice Munro (2012), ends with a depiction of Corrie’s ambivalence in the face of choosing between confronting Howard with her suspicions and protecting their relationship. Alice Munro published three different endings (May, 2013), but none of them presents an unambiguous resolution of either the question of Howard’s guilt or the fate of the affair.
Jake and Corrie, however different from us they may be, are like us in the basic sense that their behavior can be explained and predicted through reference to their mental states. We can understand that Jake’s ambition underlies his commitment to his job, and we might speculate about whether Corrie’s need for companionship will outweigh her sense of betrayal.

Based on readers’ apparent readiness to think about fictional characters as though they were real people, psychologists including Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2011) have proposed that reading often functions as a simulation of social experience. Works of fiction focus readers’ attention on especially engaging things, events, or characters in ways that may expand our repertoire of specialized knowledge and abilities. That is, fiction acquaints readers with a wide range of possible problems and solutions, and it allows readers to explore those possibilities with little personal risk in imagined worlds.

Consistent with this view, a series of empirical studies has revealed that people who read more fiction also perform better on a range of tasks assessing the capacity to infer others’ mental states (Mar et al., 2006; 2009), something psychologists call mentalizing, or theory of mind. Research conducted by Fong, Mullin, and Mar (2013) demonstrated that this effect was more pronounced when focusing specifically on participants’ familiarity with romance fiction. Given the importance of relationships, beliefs, and emotions to this genre, this finding lends more specific support to the broad simulation hypothesis that fiction is likely to improve those abilities that are related to understanding its content.

Even more direct evidence comes from experimental paradigms. In my research with Emanuele Castano (Kidd & Castano, 2013), we have found that participants randomly assigned to read literary short stories or long excerpts performed better on tests of inferring mental states
than participants who were assigned to read non-fiction or nothing at all. A neuroimaging study published this past fall by Tamir, Bricker, Dodell-Feder, and Mitchell (2015) further showed that reading descriptions of social scenes elicited activation of brain regions responsible for mentalizing, and that the extent of this activation was positively predicted by one’s general familiarity with fiction. These two lines of experimental research are particularly important because they show that reading recruits sociocognitive processes, as indicated by greater brain activity and enhanced behavioral performance on related tasks.

Thus, the evidence accumulated at this point supports the hypothesized link between reading fiction and social cognition. Yet, the extant research almost exclusively focuses on a particular sort of social cognition, mentalizing. The cognitive, developmental, and clinical psychologists who study mentalizing regularly claim that it is the basis for all social cognition (e.g., Frith & Frith, 2001). However, social psychological research has for decades documented the important roles of situational scripts, stereotypes, and norms in social cognition--none of which require direct access to others’ minds. Hirschfeld (2006) proposes that we have well-developed conceptions of social roles, norms, groups and institutions that allow us to navigate our complex social worlds. To contrast it with folk psychology, a common term for mentalizing, he labels this capacity, folk sociology. While folk psychology draws on our understanding of how other minds work and regular monitoring of their contents, folk sociology is based on how we think society works. In many cases, folk sociology presents a more efficient approach to social navigation, albeit one that is fraught with negative manifestations. For example, Susan Fiske and her colleagues (for a review see Swencionis & Fiske, 2014) have shown that we often form stereotypic impressions of others unless we are specifically motivated
to form individuated impressions that take into account their personal subjective experiences. In other words, we often draw on schematic, folk sociological processes rather than more demanding folk psychological processes.

Given the concern with stereotypic and conventional content among scholars of other media, such as television and video games, it is surprising that research into the effects of reading fiction has largely neglected folk sociological processes. For example, Appel (2008) demonstrated that watching formulaic fictional TV was positively associated with believing that the current social system is fundamentally just. Likewise, viewing TV has been linked to greater acceptance of ethnic stereotypes (Dixon, 2007; Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). Indeed, scholars have posited that using stock or stereotypic characters facilitates audiences’ understanding. For example, cognitive literary theorists, such as Culpepper (2001), working with a renovated version of E.M. Forster’s (1927) distinction between simple flat characters and complex round characters, have proposed that flat characters are easily understood because they activate existing socially shared schemas. Some works may draw not only on social stereotypes, but also upon schemas associated with specific character types, such as the cynical detective or magical helper. Flat characters, it seems, run on folk sociology. If works of fiction prompt readers to rely largely on such schematic folk sociological strategies to form impressions of characters, they may be less likely to enhance folk psychological processes such as mentalizing.

Some evidence for this hypothesis has already been accumulated. Specifically, in the experiments I conducted with Emanuele Castano, we found that participants who were randomly assigned to read popular genre fiction did not outperform participants assigned to read nonfiction or nothing at all on a mentalizing test. Thus, while reading literary fiction, which we argue tends
to present more complex, or round, characters led to better mentalizing performance, reading
popular genre fiction did not. Presumably, this is because the characters in the works of popular
genre fiction, such as the space pilot Jake Pemberton, were more easily understood in terms of
available schemas and so did not require individuating folk psychological processing.

There is also limited evidence that more literary fiction is most likely to challenge
schemas underlying folk sociology. Fong and her colleagues (Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2015)
assessed familiarity with science fiction, suspense, romance, and domestic fiction authors, and
found that only familiarity with domestic fiction negatively predicted gender stereotyping after
controlling for individual differences in personality. Critically, the category of domestic fiction,
as presented by Fong et al. (2015), overlaps substantially with the category of literary fiction as
discussed here, including authors such as Alice Munro, Toni Morrison, and John Steinbeck.
Thus, just as scholars focused on other media have found that popular formulaic fiction can
affirm and perpetuate stereotypes, researchers have also shown that other, more literary, fiction
may challenge them. These lines of research converge to suggest that the social content of stories
may be understood either using folk psychological or folk sociological processes. Further, the
content and style of those stories appears to prompt readers to utilize one set of processes or the
other. Thus, it may be possible to carefully consider Jake Pemberton’s inner-life or write Corrie
off as a typical Ontarian, but the stories themselves do not seem to urge these strategies.

I will now briefly describe and discuss recent research that I have conducted with my
colleagues to test some of the assumptions and predictions of these general hypotheses. First,
using large-scale correlational methods, we have found that familiarity with literary fiction
reliably predicts mentalizing performance, but familiarity with genre fiction does not. Second,
we have found in a series of four experiments that characters in literary fiction are generally perceived as less predictable and less easily classifiable as ‘types’ than those in popular genre fiction. These results support the basic assumption that characters in literary fiction are less easily understood through the application of schemas than those in popular genre fiction. A correlational research project has further shown that habits of reading literary and genre fiction differently contribute to a general view of personality as discrete and easily identified.

The initial experimental findings that reading literary but not popular genre fiction leads to improved performance on tests of mentalizing point to the importance of accounting for stylistic differences among works of fiction. However, these studies investigated only immediate effects and included a small number of works of fiction. To gain a better understanding of the more general long-term effects of reading literary and genre fiction, my colleagues and I have analyzed responses to an author recognition test and a test of mentalizing from over 2400 adult participants.

The Author Recognition Test is a measure of exposure to fiction originally developed by Stanovich and West (1989). Participants are shown an extensive list of names and asked to identify the authors they recognize. The presence of an equal number of non-authors and authors helps to discourage guessing, making this form of measurement less likely to be influenced by a desire to present oneself as a more avid reader than is truly the case (Rain & Mar, 2014; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992; Stanovich, West, & Harrison, 1995). Modified versions of the Author Recognition Test have been used to distinguish rates of reading nonfiction and fiction (e.g., Mar et al., 2006; 2009), as well as different genres of fiction (e.g., Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2013; 2015).
Participants in our studies completed an updated version of the Author Recognition Test (Acheson, Wells, & MacDonald, 2008) that includes 130 names, 65 of which are those of authors of fiction. In a recent study, Moore and Gordon (2014) administered the same Author Recognition Test to a large student sample and found patterns of author recognition that appeared to correspond roughly to recognition of literary and popular genre writers. Among our own participants we found a similar pattern in responses using a statistical technique called factor analysis. One group of authors was fairly easily classified as literary, while a smaller group was generally composed of popular genre authors. By calculating the number of authors of each type participants recognized, we were able to assign each participant a separate score representing familiarity with literary fiction and familiarity with popular genre fiction.

We assessed mentalizing performance by administering a widely used test of advanced theory of mind, or mentalizing, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001). Scores on this test have been linked to greater self-reported empathy, lower levels of Machiavellianism, and higher levels of effectiveness in cooperative groups, attesting to its validity.

Consistent with our experimental work, we found across three samples that familiarity with literary fiction positively predicted performance on this test, but familiarity with popular genre fiction did not.

In the first sample, we were able to test the reliability of this effect after accounting for variation in test performance due to gender, age, and undergraduate major.

In the second sample, educational attainment was included in the model along with gender and experimental condition, since these data are from a series of seven experiments in
which participants were assigned to read literary fiction, genre fiction, nonfiction, or nothing at all.

In the third sample, we measured self-reported empathy using the multidimensional Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), allowing us to rule out individual differences in this personality dimension as being responsible for the effect.

These results suggest that, over time, reading literary fiction appears to support the folk psychological process of mentalizing. By contrast, no clear pattern emerged for familiarity with popular genre fiction, suggesting that its long-term effects on mentalizing are less strong or less consistent across readers.

Our explanation for these results is that literary fiction prompts readers to more extensively rely on mentalizing to make sense of its more complex, less typical characters. This explanation hinges on the basic assumption that literary characters are indeed more complex than those in popular genre fiction. To test this assumption directly, we conducted a series of experiments in which we randomly assigned participants to read literary or popular genre fiction before completing a short questionnaire assessing their impressions of the main character in the text they read. Four of the 6 items in this questionnaire were developed to assess the perceived typicality, predictability, and ambiguity of the character. Two items were designed to tap into participants’ metacognition. Specifically, we asked them to indicate their confidence in their ascription of personality traits to the main character, a marker of the ease with which they formed a clear, unambiguous impression of the character.
In the first two experiments, participants were asked to read short excerpts, about 15 pages, of either one of 5 novels included in one of the recent long-lists for the National Book Award for Fiction, or from one of 5 recent bestselling works of genre fiction on Amazon.com.

In the third experiment, we used short stories that we had used in our initial experiments on mentalizing. Specifically, participants were asked to read one of three complete literary short stories selected from an anthology of the 2012 PEN/O. Henry Prize winners, or one of three popular genre fiction stories selected from an anthology of popular fiction (Hoppenstand, 1997).

In the fourth experiment, we selected short stories published over the past decade, 3 from the *New Yorker* and 3 from the online *Saturday Evening Post*. The *New Yorker* stories constituted the texts for the literary condition. Those from the *Saturday Evening Post* constituted a non-literary comparison group. These stories neither clearly fit into the category of formulaic genre fiction nor acclaimed literary fiction.

All of these experiments were conducted online, so we carefully attended to indicators that participants were responding carelessly or not reading the texts, and excluded data from these participants from analyses. It is important to note that while we did this to bolster the internal validity of these experiments, including data from these participants does not change the statistical significance of any of the findings I will discuss.

Across the first three experiments, the results were consistent: Participants rated the main characters in literary texts as significantly less predictable, more ambiguous, and less typical than those in the popular or genre texts. However, this was not the case in the fourth experiment. While the characters in all of the literary stories were rated as more complex than those in all of the non-literary stories, the difference between conditions was not statistically significant.
To more directly assess the extent to which the characters were perceived as types, a clear marker of a flat character, we also examined responses to a specific item reading, “In conversation, we sometimes hear people say that ‘he is such a typical man’ or ‘he is such a prototypical lawyer.’ By this, people mean that somebody is a certain type of person. How do you perceive the main character?” Participants responded using a sliding scale ranging from “clearly a type” to “cannot really tell”. By splitting responses at the midpoint on the scale, participants were classified according to whether or not they perceived the main character as mostly type or not.

In all but the first experiment, participants were significantly less likely than chance to describe the main characters in the literary texts as a type. In the third experiment, which most specifically compared responses to genre fiction and literary fiction stories, characters in the genre texts were significantly more likely than chance to be described as a type.

Returning to the two characters I introduced at the beginning of this talk, Jake Pemberton from *Space Jockey* by Heinlein and Corrie from *Corrie* by Munro, this pattern is especially clear. Of the 27 participants who read *Corrie*, only 6 (22%) rated her as a type. By contrast, 21 of the 28 (77%) participants who read *Space Jockey* rated Jake Pemberton as a type. Thus, despite variability across participants and texts, there appears to be fairly consistent agreement that literary characters are less typical than popular and genre fiction characters. This pattern of results offers only tentative support for the hypothesis that non-literary fiction depicts characters who are always easily classified as types. Strong support for this hypothesis only emerged in the third study, in which classic works of genre fiction were used. When Amazon.com bestsellers or *Saturday Evening Post* stories were used, participants were equally likely to describe the main
character as a type or as not a type. However, these results do consistently support the hypothesis that characters in literary fiction, in general, tend to be perceived by ordinary readers as complex and atypical.

These findings bear on a more general question about what fiction teaches readers about human nature. Some scholars, such as Gerrig and Rapp (2004) have argued that part of the appeal of fiction is that it often confirms our initial impressions of characters, ultimately supporting the belief that people can be easily understood. Similarly, Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger (2012) argue that most characters in fiction can be easily categorized as protagonists or antagonists, each with a consistent set of well-defined personality characteristics. The theories and evidence presented by these researchers suggest that some fiction may lead readers to believe that people can be generally understood in terms of stable, discrete personality characteristics.

Bastian and Haslam (2006), psychologists who study naive conceptions of personality, identify beliefs that others can be easily classified as discrete types as a component of psychological essentialism called discreteness. Based on the evidence above, we expected that literary and genre fiction exposure would predict endorsement of this aspect of psychological essentialism in different ways.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a series of correlational studies in which participants completed the Author Recognition Test and filled out an 8-item questionnaire assessing the discreteness component of psychological essentialism. Items include statements like “Everyone is either a certain type of person or they are not” and “People can behave in ways that seem ambiguous, but the central aspects of their character are clear-cut.”
Using the same method of creating separate scores reflecting familiarity with literary and genre fiction described earlier, we were able to test how exposure to each type of fiction relates to the discreteness aspect of psychological essentialism. Across the combined samples, which included 488 online participants, familiarity with literary fiction negatively predicts and familiarity with popular genre fiction positively predicts discreteness beliefs. These results are thus consistent with both the hypothesis that reading can promote the view that people fall into discrete types, and the view that they do not. Which effect occurs seems to depend on what sorts of characters one encounters in fiction. Fictional worlds populated by ambiguous, developing, and complex characters appear likely to reduce essentialism while those inhabited by stereotypic, stock, or just more predictable characters may foster it.

The distinct relations of literary and genre fiction with psychological essentialism help to inform further expectations about the effects of reading different types of fiction on folk sociology. Bastian and Haslam (2006) argue that the belief that people can be seen in terms of well-defined types underlies the formation, transmission, and use of social stereotypes. For a theory of society based on stereotypes to make sense, it is necessary to believe that those stereotypes correspond to meaningful personality characteristics: artists can be seen as spontaneous because that is just how artists are; engineers are introverted because they have a common introverted essence. The logic here is tautological, but that’s essentialism. Thus, reading fiction that presents characters who can be understood as types may help support a keystone of folk sociology, the belief that people can be meaningfully categorized on the basis of a presumed shared essence.
To summarize, although evidence continues to accumulate that reading fiction, particularly literary fiction, is linked to better performance on folk psychological tasks like mentalizing, there is still little research relevant to other domains of social cognition, namely folk sociology. Some of the studies discussed here support the hypothesis that popular fiction supports more schematic, category-based representations of others. However, a critical limitation of these studies is that their operationalizations of folk sociology focus primarily on its most simple manifestations. While understanding others in terms of social categories, roles, and norms is often associated with simplistic stereotyping and allegiance to convention, a nuanced understanding of social groups may also provide an important bias for challenging oppressive or inefficient social relations, traditions, and institutions. Thus, approaching a clear understanding of the effects of reading different sorts of fiction on folk sociology requires a broader and less pejorative account of folk sociology than is typically the case among social psychologists.

Likewise, a more detailed account of genre may also be necessary. In particular, some forms of genre fiction, such as science fiction and romance, include subgenres that are defined by their subversive challenges to existing social hierarchies. Specifically comparing, for example, the effects of reading traditional romance fiction, such as that published by Harlequin, and more recent feminist romance fiction may indicate a range of folk sociological effects. Future research into the folk sociological effects of reading fiction, then, will benefit from a more nuanced treatment of popular genre fiction.

Overall, the research I have reviewed and presented today demonstrates that readers responses to fiction can be studied, though with limits, using psychological methods. To a naive or uncharitable observer, a reader may appear inert and disengaged from others. However, a
growing body of evidence suggests that engaging with fiction influences how we make sense of our real social world. In this sense, reading is not just a way of appreciating or consuming culture, it may also be a practice that allows us to transmit and even shape culture. The accumulated findings further suggest that reading is not a uniform cultural practice with homogenous effects. It seems increasingly plausible that differences in fictional worlds may lead to different changes in the real one. Using empirical methods to identify which differences matter, and how they bring about changes will contribute to a clearer understanding of the diverse roles of fiction both in our personal lives and our broader cultural communities.

References


Experimental Social Psychology, 42(2), 228-235.


