Medical Xpress

Can fiction stories make us more empathetic?

August 11 2014

Empathy is important for navigating complex social situations, and is considered a highly desirable trait. Raymond Mar, a psychologist at York University in Canada, discussed how exposure to narrative fiction may improve our ability to understand what other people are thinking or feeling in his session at the American Psychological Association's 122nd Annual Convention.

Exposure to stories

Many stories are about people—their mental states, their relationships—even stories with inanimate objects, may have human-like characteristics. Mar explains that we understand stories using basic cognitive functions, and there is not a special module in the brain that allows us to do this. Understanding stories is similar to the way we understand the real world. "When people read stories we invoke personal experiences. We're relying not just on words on a page, but also our own past experiences," Mar says. We often have thoughts and emotions that are consistent with what's going on in a story.

According to Mar, social outcomes that could come out of being exposed to narrative fiction can include exposure to social content, reflecting on past social interactions, or imagining future interactions. We may gain insight into things that have happened in the past that relates to a character in a story, and resonates with our experiences. "Even though fiction is fabricated, it can communicate truths about

human psychology and relationships," Mar explains.

Available research on narrative fiction

According to one study, over 75 percent of books typically read to preschoolers frequently reference mental states, and include very complex things such as false-belief or situational irony. "Children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old acquire a theory-of-mind, in other words, an understanding that other people have thoughts, beliefs and desires that may differ from their own…Around the same ages, children also begin to understand what characters in stories are feeling and thinking," Mar says.

In 2010, Mar and colleagues published a study which found that parents that were able to recognize children's authors and book titles predicted their child's performance on theory-of-mind tests. Theory-of-mind tests included testing if a child is able to understand that someone may prefer broccoli over a cookie, and how that is unique from their own desire for the cookie. Parental recognition of adult book titles or author's had no effect on their child's performance— the result was very specific to children's books. Mar cautions that the studies available are correlations, which do not provide an explanation of causation, and more research is necessary to understand why these correlations exist.

Mar's study also illustrates that exposure to movies predicted better theory-of-mind test performance in children. But the more television a child was exposed to, the worse they performed on theory-of-mind tests. There have not been studies to determine the reason this correlation occurred, but there are a few theories. Mar explains that it's possible parents may engage more in discussions of mental states during a movie versus a television show, or possibly the fact that children may have difficulty following a television show broken up by commercial breaks.

There are aspects of joint-reading between parents and children seems to be important to the process, Mar adds. There may be discussions of mental states, and more discussions during joint-reading than throughout other moments of daily life between a parent and child. These discussions may play a significant role in the development process of the child. A recent study Mar highlights shows that reading a child a tale about honesty led the child to act more honestly when presented with an opportunity to lie or cheat.

There is some evidence that adults who process stories deeply and are highly engaged in the story report more empathy, but the results have been inconsistent. Mar's study in 2006 illustrated that fiction predicts individual's ability to infer mental states from photographs, and the result has been replicated by a number of other studies. Studies have shown that narrative fiction correlates with better mental-inference ability and more liberal social attitudes. "Experiences that we have in our life shape our understanding of the world…and imagined experiences through narrative fiction stories are also likely to shape or change us. But with a caveat—it's not a magic bullet—it's an opportunity for change and growth," Mar says.

More information: Raymond Mar, "Fiction and its relation to real-world empathy, cognition, and behavior." Thursday, August 7, 1:00-1:50 am ET. American Psychological Association's 122nd Annual Convention. Walter E. Washington Convention Center, 801 Mount Vernon Pl., NW, Washington, D.C.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Can fiction stories make us more empathetic? (2014, August 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-fiction-stories-empathetic.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.