

How Does Fiction Inform Working Lives?

An Exploration of Empathy and Social Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationships between fiction and working lives by exploring the roles of empathy and sustainability in how people read and perceive fiction in relation to their own private and working lives. The paper problematizes some notions manifesting within these relationships by discussing how ideology infiltrates both the understanding of concepts themselves as well as how they relate to each other. Hence, it thereby discusses how the individual experience of fiction has an effect on behavior but is influenced by ideological beliefs about society which are largely implicit to the reader herself. It thereby explains why fiction does not always enhance empathy. Using the distinction between aesthetic and ethical good, the paper elucidates how fiction may sustain an ideological version of empathy, and thus sustaining contemporary practices in the workplace and the economic system. The paper finishes with an exploration of how fiction may enable a reader to become aware of ideology, thereby opening possibilities to achieve more viable forms of social sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Empathy, Fiction, Ideology, Social Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing evidence that fiction experiences, including reading books, watching movies and going to the theatre, may have real effects on people's lives (Green & Brock, 2000). We define fiction broadly as 'something created by the human mind' (Phillips, 1995), and serves to differentiate between history (i.e., that what has happened) and fiction (i.e., all that *may* happen). Fiction does not only offer the opportunity to provide entertainment and distraction from daily life, but also has the potential for evoking inspiration, imagination and empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). For instance, empirical research has shown that fiction reading may enhance empathic skills (Kidd & Castano, 2013) and theory of mind (Mar, 2011). Recently, there has been some first theoretical and empirical work on how fiction reading may influence people in their work behaviors (Bal, Butterman, & Bakker, 2011; Brokerhof, Bal, Jansen, & Solinger, 2018; Hakemulder, Fialho, & Bal, 2016). This is an important avenue for research on fiction, as non-work experiences and activities may have profound effects on how people feel, think and behave at work (Sonnentag, 2003).

However, there is still limited understanding of how fiction may have an effect on people's work behaviors and how fiction may alter understandings of the workplace itself. This is important as fiction and its proposed effects on empathy have the possibility to change people's lives, which is needed in the contemporary times, where workplaces are becoming increasingly *unsustainable* as a result

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of the current dominant economic system, and therefore postulating the crucial role of new ideas to organize workplaces and society (Bal, 2017; Donaldson & Walsh, 2015). A fundamental issue here pertains to the distinction between fiction and reality. An expectation that fiction could affect the way in which people perceive the workplace and themselves in relation to their work, also implies an assumption that the world of fiction has the potential to be translated into the real world. Yet, at the same time, the current paper builds on the work of Bruner (1986), in which the distinctions between reality and fiction become increasingly blurry. In a socially constructed and post-truth world, it is no longer straightforward to distinguish between what has been made up and constitutes the fictional aspects of imagination, and what is real and 'factual'. For instance, the impact of climate change on everyday life is constructed to be a combination of both real (e.g., wildfires, droughts, and floods) and fictional or imagined (the end of planet earth) stories, thereby making it increasingly difficult to assess the true nature of things in life and society. It is therefore needed to critically assess what fiction really represents in relation to people's lives, and what role it plays in relation to the workplace.

The paper pays specifically attention to the role of empathy, as empathy allows people to connect their own feelings with other people and to establish real, meaningful connections with other people (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Davis, 1983). In this paper, empathy is defined as the intellectual and cognitive abilities to recognize emotions of other people, and to respond emotionally to others (Davis, 1983; Grandey, 2000). Empathy is important in society and the workplace, as within any society and workplace, it is the relationships between people that matter and form the foundation of social life and morality (De Waal, 2009). Without empathy, people cannot effectively function within society and form emotional bonds with others. The question therefore, is, how empathy can be nourished in workplaces, and in particular whether fiction has the possibility to enhance empathy in the workplace (Brokerhof et al., 2018). The paper focuses in particular on the role of ideology in fiction and empathy, and how fiction may help readers to become aware of and critique dominant ideologies and systems and thereby overcome the limitations of ideological empathy.

To do so, this paper is divided into three main sections: first, the meaning of fiction is discussed and how fiction is related to people at work. Second, fiction is discussed in relation to empathy in the workplace. Finally, the implications of a fiction-empathy link for the workplace are discussed. As currently economic systems including neoliberal capitalism (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2014) have a pervasive impact on how workplace practices manifest, there is a need to construct positive alternatives. Fiction may provide an important tool for the sensemaking (Brokerhof et al., 2018) and imagination (Black & Barnes, 2015) of an alternative working environment that is sustainable and built upon a dignity-paradigm, which postulates the centrality of the intrinsic worth of human beings and the planet in forming how workplaces are organized (Bal, 2017).

A Framework for Understanding Fiction in Contemporary Society

Two elements are important when theorizing on the role of fiction in relation to the workplace: the experience of fiction, and the role of empathy in explaining the relationships of fiction with attitudes and behaviors. We will explain each of these in more detail and critically analyze dominant discourse and literature around these constructs. Special attention is devoted to the role of ideology, as it affects the constructs and relationships under study, and may alter understandings of the very relationships.

During recent decades, a growing interest in conceptual and empirical research on the effects of fiction exposure has elucidated some of the processes that lead fiction reading to affect people emotionally and in their behaviors (Hakemulder et al., 2016; Kidd & Castano, 2013). For instance, research has shown that fiction may enhance empathic skills (Kidd & Castano, 2013), especially when people are transported into a story (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). Moreover, research has also shown that fiction reading may (temporarily) alter perceptions of personality (Djikic et al., 2009), and research has shown that fiction may enhance understanding of human nature, heighten tolerance for ambiguity (Hakemulder et al., 2016), and relate to beliefs in a just world (Appel, 2008). Moreover, fiction has been used to explain work behaviors (Bal et al., 2011), and has been used in business

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