

How does Fiction Inform Working Lives?

An Exploration of the Role of Empathy

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationships between fiction and working lives through exploring the role of empathy in how people read and perceive fiction in relation to their own private and working lives. It discusses how experience of fiction may cause an empathic reaction in the reader, subsequently leading to behaviors contributing to greater empathy at work. 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 by a reader 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 itself. 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 empathy.

Keywords: Fiction, Empathy, Ideology

Running Head: Fiction and Working Lives

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 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 schools to teach students about ethical dilemma's (Coutu, 2006; see also Alvarez & Merchan, 1992). An underlying assumption of contemporary research on fiction reading is that people enjoy fiction reading,

and that fiction does not merely provide entertainment, but true inspiration which transfers to daily life. Theoretically, the effects of fiction reading on people has been explained by Gerrig (1993) and Green and Brock (2000) as the transportation effect: because people get 'lost' in a book and are emotionally and cognitively fully involved and immersed into a story, this mental journey allows for the individual be affected by a story.

While fiction has thus been investigated frequently as catalyst for change within people regarding their beliefs, feelings, attitudes and behaviors (Hakemulder et al., 2016), a critical notion pertains to what fiction really is and how it is experienced by readers. While fiction can be described as something created by the human mind (Bal et al., 2011; Bruner, 1986), it is often contrasted to facts or history. While history pertains to all that has happened, fiction refers to all that *may* happen. However, this distinction increases in complexity when taken into account the Kantian notion that all our 'factual' knowledge about our world originates from our perceptions, or our abilities to perceive the world. In other words, facts are not merely objective, but they represent all that may have happened in the past or is unfolding presently. The distinction therefore becomes blurry as fiction penetrates understanding of the real world, and in current times which have given rise to the so-called 'post-truth' world (Hodges, 2017), it becomes increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction. It is therefore worthwhile to integrate the separation of Bruner (1986) between two modes of thought, or ways of knowing, being the logicoscientific mode and the narrative mode. This first mode of thought aims for formal, empirical proof, is truth-seeking, and looks for universal truth conditions (Bruner, 1986). In this mode of thought, consistency, noncontradictions and testability are used to assess a text or a narrative. This mode of thinking is resembled in nonfiction, such as scientific research. The narrative mode, however, establishes verisimilitude, or truthlikeness, and aims at particular connections between two events, rather than on universal truth conditions. Its central focus is on believability and not

on consistency and noncontradictions. It is because of the narrative mode of thinking that fiction may have such profound effects on people, as they represent personal truths rather than universal truths, which may be more strongly aligned with personal change in readers. Fiction reading is not a passive event, but an active *experience*, that is, people need to be able to make sense of a text, and to have an awareness that there is more meaning in what they do in their lives than just their daily observed behaviour and attitudes. Fiction connects people to a wider world, which can be accessed through fiction reading, narratives and stories (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009). Fiction as essentially a way of cultural production elucidates the meaning of life as moving beyond the mundane nature of everyday life and work. In effect, we expect fiction to affect people emotionally and profoundly, which should have implications for their identities and empathy, or in other words, the skill to sympathize with others, to feel what others feel, to recognize emotions in the other, and to feel compassion (Davis, 1983). All of these skills are crucial in the social domain and at work, especially for individuals who work with other people, be it students, patients, colleagues or customers. However, fiction is also important beyond the individual experience, as fiction oftens deals with issues that are relevant in society, such as racism, slavery, and economic issues. They can even have an impact on the world itself, for instance through raising societal awareness of social issues.

It is for instance not surprising to see how Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is credited for being a force against racism and for the abolishment of slavery in the US, and while debated whether the novel really achieved that, it is important to acknowledge the wide role fiction can play in spurring societal debates. For instance, John Steinbeck's 'Grapes of Wrath' provides a relevant insight into the functioning of capitalism, and therefore offers a critique of capitalism itself through exposing its effects on the most vulnerable people at the bottom of the pyramid in capitalist society. However, fiction does not only

unfold in novels and at the movie screens – people are also exposed to ‘public fictions’ in a post-truth world where narratives are inherently needed to ‘sell’ capitalism to the public: while the ‘true’ story is not a compelling one, as Steinbeck shows in his *Grapes of Wrath*, people need the compelling stories in order to buy into ideology and the economic order in order to accept their predicament. Hence, it can be observed that fiction is not unidirectionally created by the arts for entertainment and inspiration for the people, but simultaneously, an *active* escape into fiction can be observed: people are drawn to fiction to distance themselves from reality through its unattainable nature. For instance, politicians convey a message that national borders can really be closed to immigrants, that countries can be safe from terrorism, and so on. Notwithstanding the fictitious nature of such statements, people accept such political shortcuts, and consume these narratives in contemporary society. The question, therefore, is which role fiction plays and which role it could play in eliciting real empathy rather than complying to dominant norms in society about the system and the role of individuals within the system.

The Meaning of Fiction in Everyday Life

Research on fiction reading has developed a somewhat myopic focus on the positive consequences of fiction reading, thereby implicitly ignoring the more fundamental problems which underlie the role of fiction in society, as exemplified above as well. As stated earlier, more research is needed to analyze the role of fiction in producing people’s workplace behaviors and their views of the economic order. To understand the more problematic nature of fiction, two examples are discussed in relation to the meaning of fiction, using the distinction made by Anthony Burgess, author of the novel *Clockwork Orange* (made into the movie by Stanley Kubrick). Burgess distinguishes between aesthetic and ethical good, and he argues that the two are not always combined. The WWII concentration camp and the movie *Clockwork Orange* serve to illustrate this point. First, the WWII concentration camp offers a

context where a sharp distinction between aesthetic and ethical good can be observed: while officers engage in the most horrible actions during the day in the concentration camp, at the same time, they ‘enjoy’ classical music in the evening, either by listening to it on LP, or to orchestras made up of prisoners themselves, who by playing in an orchestra may save their own lives. The act of listening to the music is important here, as it serves to legitimize the ‘goodness’ of the concentration camp officer: while they have to engage in the most horrible actions (hence the absence of ethical good), they are still able to perceive themselves as good people, as they enjoy classical music (hence the presence of aesthetic good). The absence of consistency between the two types of good is not problematic, as one can adhere to either one of the two types of good, and still perceive oneself as a good person. In other words, fiction is in this instance merely a distraction from reality which ultimately serves to support reality itself, and therefore becomes ideological. The role of fiction (i.e., enjoying classical music) does not have real meaning, but only to convey the goodness of the person experiencing it. Hence, fiction supports reality here. This is the first argument why fiction does not always serve to make people better persons: while fiction may enhance perceptions of aesthetic good, this does not necessarily translate into daily behavior, and thus, the divide between the two types of good is maintained.

However, the movie *Clockwork Orange* offers a more profound explanation of this divide, as the movie does not just show that this distinction exists, but also the direction of the relationship between fiction and reality. Fiction is not merely an escape from reality, but an escape *into* reality, and thus fiction recreates reality itself. First, the main protagonist, Alex, is comparable to the concentration camp officer: he is in a gang which commits violence and rape, and therefore exemplifies the absence of ethical good. At the same time, Alex enjoys Beethoven, and in particular the Ode to Joy (Alle Menschen werden Brüder; ‘All people become brothers’), which just as in the concentration camp represents the

legitimization of absence of ethical good (i.e., violence and rape) through the presence of aesthetic good (i.e., enjoying Beethoven). However, the choice for Beethoven and the Ode to Joy is particularly relevant here, as it serves to illustrate the very meaning of fiction (in this case, classical music). As is well-known, Ode to Joy is the official hymn of the European Union, and represents the unity of the European countries under one flag. Yet, at the same time, the Ode to Joy has been used in many countries across the world as the national anthem or (un-)official hymn, including the Nazis, China, the Soviet Union, the Shining Path in Peru and various other dictatorial regimes. The superficial explanation of the popularity of Ode to Joy is that it provokes emotions universally when hearing the song, yet at the same time does not convey any real message, as the words (Alle Menschen werden Brüder) themselves are ideological in their universal meaninglessness. In this sense, Ode to Joy is fiction without meaning, which can be ‘enjoyed’ universally, despite the context in which it is played – be it a dictatorial celebration or a celebration of bureaucracy, or a victory of a stateless sportsplayer at the Olympics.

Nevertheless, the more profound meaning of the Ode to Joy is also an exclusive one, as people generally know only the melodic part of the Ninth Symphony (i.e., Ode to Joy), and not the cacaphonical second part of the fourth movement of the symphony which serves as a counterpart to Ode to Joy; it is in this part where reality manifests, the multiplicity of voices and sounds, where the melodic part is preceded to be undone, and essentially where the melodic part is exposed as a true fiction, ideological in meaning rather than merely empty (Žižek, 1989). In other words, the well-known tune of Ode to Joy also aims at legitimizing current state of affairs. Hence, in the case of *Clockwork Orange*, Alex’ love for Beethoven does not just serve to distract from the absence of ethical good (as was the case with the classical music in the concentration camps), but is needed in order to *legitimize* the actions by drawing the attention to the fiction itself to maintain a perception of the character as not

fundamentally corrupt, but with an inherent goodness that is merely compromised by society and the system which pushes young people towards delinquency. Hence, the viewer is likely to attribute Alex's behavior to external circumstances rather than internal, as he has shown to be able to enjoy aesthetic good things in life, such as classical music.

A similar process unfolds with the Trump presidency in the US, where political comedy shows (e.g., the Daily Show) thrive as a result of Trump, and which play an important role in legitimizing the presidency through de-emphasizing the problematic nature of the neoliberal capitalist program which is covered up by the overreliance on the absurdity, or the narrative fiction that is created, and accepted worldwide. Trump therefore becomes absurd and comical, as a fictional caricature which has become alive, through which the underlying political-economic program is neglected or deemed undangerous. In sum, fiction does not just have a positive role in people's lives, but can also perform a role as legitimizer of current practices in society, including maintenance of the status quo and an acceptance of existing hegemonic order. This more problematic nature of fiction needs to be taken into account, and explored further.

Fiction and Empathy

An often made claim pertaining to the effects of fiction reading on interpersonal attitudes and behaviors include the role of empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). Fiction, if able to truly influence people, should enhance the empathic skills of the reader, as it stimulates imagination, perspective taking, sympathizing, and tolerance for ambiguity. Fiction allows a reader to engage with the world of people they would not normally familiarize themselves with, and therefore provide opportunities to see through the perspectives of unfamiliar people, leading to higher empathy. Empathy can be described as the recognition, understanding and sympathy towards the feelings and thoughts of another person (Davis, 1983). However, recently, there has been growing critique on the importance

of empathy in social life, and authors such as Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2014) have argued against empathy as an important guidance in social life, and especially in morality. These scholars have argued that there are some fundamental problems with empathy. For instance, being too empathic may inhibit people from doing anything else than ruminating the predicament of contemporary society rather than acting to improve it. Moreover, research also shows that people are more likely to express empathy towards people they like and people who are like them (Prinz, 2011). Thus, empathy may be particularly targeted at ingroups rather than outgroups, or the people who need it most (e.g., minorities or poor people). Furthermore, empathy is also a poor guidance for moral behaviour: if people only help others who they feel empathy for, this implies that they will not necessarily do what is actually ethical or needed in a situation. Empathy may also be easily manipulated: a tv advert about poor children in Africa may make people donate immediately but this may be more likely to relieve people's own sense of guilt rather than truly eradicating poverty.

So it is needed to differentiate between two uses of empathy: an ideological version of empathy and an alternative understanding of empathy. We refer to ideology in line with Žižek (1989), as the invisible understandings of the social order, and thus not merely as the explicit attempts to create an image of society, but the largely hidden meanings as well. The first one is the critiqued one – that is how critical scholars react to an ideological version of empathy (Prinz, 2011), bolstered by various findings from mainly psychology (and preferably neuro-psychology) which would indicate an 'objective', deterministic stance towards how human beings behave, think and feel, as if there is no bidirectional relationship between a scientific psychologist and the object of his study. Hence, this ideological version of empathy is both present in academia and the 'real' world, and describes human beings as merely destined to use empathy only to their own (ingroup) advantage. A critique of empathy within this domain (Bloom, 2014; Prinz, 2017) is primarily based on its distorted relationship with

behaviour – it either does not correspond to behavior (empathy does not inform people what is the best behavior), or it redirects behaviour in an exclusive way, indicating that empathy may lead people to help others who they like or who are proximal instead of people who need it most. Notwithstanding this reductionist way of conceptualizing empathy, it is needed to formulate a more constructive approach to empathy.

Hence, to postulate a second use of ideological empathy, we return to the discussion of fiction, where the possibility of meaningless, yet ideological fiction was exposed (e.g., *Ode to Joy*), and we observe here a similar use of a meaningless, ideological version of empathy. This is the empathy that is nondirectional, and primarily serves to maintain the system. It could even be argued that the system can only be maintained through the ideological version of empathy. For instance, scholars (and especially philosophers) often theorize about empathy in the context of homeless people, and whether people should give money to homeless people begging on the streets (indicating a form of behavioral empathy). Such an example of shallow empathy is highly misleading, as this situation is indicative, or a symptom, of the very system that creates the possibility of homeless people. By giving the homeless person some money, an individual does not do much for this person, but a lot to herself. The homeless person may survive another day, but the individual giving the money has relieved her own guilt towards this person and homeless people in general. An essentially similar process unfolds with fair-trade consumption: feelings of guilt are relieved, and through consuming, the world can be saved. Empathy plays a mediating role here in addressing the attention to poor farmers in the periphery of the capitalist system, who would not survive without the Western world saving them. While these notions are inherently neo-colonial and have a white supremacist nature, they redirect genuine empathic concern towards its ideological derivative, in which empathy has lost its very meaning it is supposed to have. Hence, while people are genuinely concerned about the conditions under which their food is

produced, at the same time, structural inequalities are neglected, de-emphasized, or disavowed. As a result the economic system underpinning these inequalities are maintained while in the margin, fair-trade products are flourishing.

The explanation is straightforward: empathy guides feelings towards the other, but the other is so numerous that people cannot comprehend how many others there are, which only contributes to a process of psychological numbing (Slovic, 2007). This can also be observed in the current economic system where people may be on the side of the winners, but the externalities created by the system can be easily observed: rising inequality, poverty, climate change, wars, drug wars, increasing power of global elites, and so on (Bal, 2017). However, people feel helpless to change the system and do not know where to begin, or more importantly, do not know how to imagine how another system would look like. Hence, to mitigate feelings of guilt and inertia, people donate money to charity, give the homeless person some change, buy fair-trade products and put solar panels on their roofs. To further alleviate guilt, people may meditate, practice mindfulness, pray or do yoga, and fully energized by those activities and feeling good about themselves, they are ready to participate within the current system. In other words, it is through the ideological interpretation of empathy that the economic-political system is maintained without having to think about how the system needs to be transformed in more radical ways to ensure equality, fairness and dignity (Bal, 2017). The effect of the narrow ideological interpretation of empathy - relieving guilt - thus stifles a more integrative interpretation of empathy as feeling for the other who is not known. This way, empathy has no other meaning than reaffirming contemporary practices and maintenance of the status quo. In this view of empathy, it should be ascertained that while fiction may lead to higher empathy, it does not imply a possibility for change in society, including social sustainability, due to its ideological use in both science and practice.

Revaluing Fiction and Empathy

The question therefore is whether fiction has the potential to truly inspire empathy, and under which conditions these effects manifest. In a world where empathy is actively used in an ideological way (Prinz, 2011), it is important to assess how fiction may help in reflecting upon ideology itself. Stepping out of ideology is impossible as stepping out immediately involves a step into another ideology. However, fiction is relevant as it may help to create awareness that something is ideological (e.g., fiction, empathy discourse), and thus used in a way to serve a particular goal (such as to show that empathy is something that can only exist towards ingroups). Hence, to be able to assess the ideological use of empathy, one has to become aware of ideology and how one is caught up herself in the system. This may be a painful experience, where one has to distance herself from her very own core assumptions about herself and her social environment. To be aware of ideology, people have to acknowledge how they themselves are caught up in the system, and also actively contribute to the maintenance of the system, through consumption and implicit adherence to the ‘rules of the game’.

It can be argued that fiction can play a role in elucidating the functioning of ideology, and the possibility to overcome ideology. We discuss two examples here: Dostoevsky and Ellison. In ‘Demons’ and ‘The Adolescent’ Dostoevsky wrote about the first movements of a political revolution that would materialize 50 years later, but he already pointed towards revolutionary spirit. Yet, his books can be seen as revealing awareness of ideology, as they elevate themselves through his focus on the individual human being and the psychology of the human being into an understanding of how ideology functions at the individual level. Particularly informative is the ‘Brothers Karamazow’, and the brothers who during the book are evil, sympathetic, understandable, insane, loveable, and many things in between. What Dostoevsky establishes here is not merely presenting two-dimensional characters asking for, or declining an invitation to, sympathy, but he presents them as the characters truly ‘are’, or

how he wants them to be, as they are fictitious. Doing so, he presents his characters for the reader to reflect on their dimensionality, and thus perceiving characters not merely residing within a spectrum of good or evil, but constantly moving in between the extremes. Hence, the characters are not presented ideologically anymore (i.e., to serve a purpose of eliciting emotions of ‘empathy’ toward a particular character in the novel), but they are ‘real’ human beings.

In addition, Ralph Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man’ offers an insight into the positioning of colored people in the US in the first half of the 20th century (which is still relevant to understand contemporary US society). It has played a crucial role in elucidating and revealing the profound effects of an ideology of separation and racism and how this can be maintained in society through affecting the psyche of being a minority and its associated feeling of inferiority and escape into anonymity and namelessness. Hence, these examples show that fiction can move beyond the simplicity of the homeless person, who can either be pitied or accused of not having managed one’s life successfully, and moves towards a position where one has to deal with real people.

What is this literary empathy? First, it is about seeing human connections, and that means one is able to explain one’s position out of compassion rather than this position being ideologically originated. Hence, an alternative view of empathy is that it refers both to the ability to recognize emotions in other people, and to be able to emotionally respond, but more profoundly that one is able to perceive a duty to do so. This duty is also referred to as compassion. Compassion is different from ideological empathy, in that the latter may resulting from one’s preferences to help people who are like us, while the former postulates the necessity of action on the basis of duty to help others. In other words, helping a homeless person should neither result from a (subconscious) desire to make oneself feel good, nor should this person be left alone because her misfortune results from her inability to take care

of herself. Instead, it is one's duty to help. Compassion out of duty is often neglected, and duty is often attributed to cognitive systems, to thinking rather than feeling, and this is a misinterpretation of duty (e.g., Bal, 2017). Hence, real empathy is bi-directional: it is established in the connection between two people, whereby judgments are not based on the superficial information available at a certain moment in time. For instance, the reader's own frame of reference is not used to evaluate whether Dimitry is a good or evil person in the *Brothers Karamazow*, but one's own frame of reference is penetrated by the other person (the character in the novel), in the relationship that is constructed. This is the true fictional narrative experience that elicits change or a new insight in the reader. In other words: what can Dimitry from the *Brothers Karamazow* tell the reader about the reader herself? It is here that the true connection is made, and when empathy becomes truly relationally orientated.

Fiction and its Meaning at Work

Fiction and stories have a role to play in eliciting feelings towards the other, yet the problem is that the other is difficult to see, so people project this perception of the other on a particular individual who resembles oneself (Bloom, 2014). These choices are biased as psychologists show that people prefer others who are like them. At the same time, this would reduce the role of fiction to non-art, and thus maintaining ideology through postulating the direction of one's empathic concerns towards people who one wants to project her feelings on. This does not mean that all fiction is merely 'ideological': a distinction should be made between various types of fiction. Hence, it is needed to focus on what is really distinctive. For instance, the late Umberto Eco wrote about the difference between art and kitsch, where artful fiction is non-descriptive – it does not aim to provoke specific emotions, but leaves it to the reader to make her own interpretations of the story. Kitsch, non-literary fiction, or ideological fiction, may indeed be focused on eliciting specific emotions in the reader. So art and fiction may really transform, yet this also concerns a highly idiosyncratic and personal

process which cannot be determined on the basis of a specific piece of fiction (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). At the minimal level, a process of *defamiliarization* is needed, where a reader is surprised by a novelty in the text, has to slow down and pay conscious attention to interpret the text.

The question therefore is what fiction has to offer in practice. First, it is needed to seek the truths in fiction that may help translate to practice. Fiction is not always a positive guidance to empathy, and as fiction often offers an *escape* from reality, it does not have to spontaneously translate into more empathic behaviour. As argued above, fiction has an *ideological* side which may distract from its potential to contribute to constructive behaviour in society and workplaces. This ideological side co-aligns with that of empathy, which shares a similar potentiality of being translated into an ideological derivative of itself. We therefore have three main implications.

First, academics who explore the role of fiction in society and workplaces, and in particular the role of fiction in relation to empathy, have to be aware that both fiction and empathy are understood in relation ideology, and that theorizing cannot be ideology-independent. While some may neglect this (e.g., Bloom, 2014; Prinz, 2017), scholars have to be precise in conceptualizing the dynamics of fiction and empathy, and its translation to practical use in society.

Second, any practitioner in the widest sense, has to become aware of such meanings. In other words, when we read fiction ourselves, or if we use fiction in the classroom, or in any social setting to promote societal change, we have to be aware of the potential meanings of fiction, and that it can be understood in multiple ways, not all of them merely contributing to constructive social change, as they may also serve an aesthetic purpose. At the same time, however, fiction may serve as the intermediary between post-truths in our contemporary world, and the need for imagined futures. More specifically, through reading fiction, we may

develop our own empathic sense, and thereby reimagine possibilities for constructing positive change in our worlds. Therefore, fiction may actually play an important role in dealing with climate change, inequality and so on, just as it had played for social issues such as racism and slavery.

Finally, our paper contributes to better understanding of how we may think about fiction in our contemporary society. While we tend to separate implications for academics and scholarly use and those for ‘practitioners’, in the end we are all practitioners ourselves, and universities are inherently integrated in the production of knowledge in society. Thereby, universities play a role in the artificial separation between truth and non-truths, and fiction may be a way out of this predicament. In other words, while facts may be dissociated from feeling of sympathy and empathy, people in society tend to emotionally link more strongly with post-truths and ideological versions of reality as offered by populist leaders. At the same time, people discredit science, as emotional involvement with science seems lacking. Our paper proposes that fiction may actually serve as an intermediary between these worlds, and that imagination for both scholars and anyone outside of academia can be enhanced through the notion of fiction.

What this fiction should entail, cannot be dictated, as there is no book that can be picked, and proclaimed as the guide to a ‘better world’. At the same time, it is the beauty of art: its outcomes on the reader cannot be predicted, as it concerns a process of communication between the work of art and the person, and nothing is stable here. A reading of the Brothers Karamazow will be fundamentally different and will have fundamentally different outcomes when it’s being read during adolescence or late adulthood, and while much empirical research has elucidated the processes of reading fiction, it always remains an idiosyncratic process. Yet, it is fiction that provides the opportunity, the invitation, to become aware and even to step out of ideology, to perceive oneself outside of the world that one is captured by. So

fiction as escape is unidirectional and does not truly challenge people and provide ways to contributing to society and workplaces. At the same time, fiction may provide ways to reflect on what truth could mean in society and how the current dominant economic system may be challenged.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the relationships between fiction and empathy in our society. The paper analysed and concluded that the relationships between fiction, empathy and sustainability are not straightforward, but interact with dominant ideology in society, which may affect the relationships under study, as well as understandings of the concepts themselves. To conclude, in order to achieve a meaningful way of managing empathy, it is important to become aware of the ideology within the concepts used in everyday practice, and one fruitful way to achieve this is through fiction reading, which offers a way to questions that no-one dares to ask, or answers that no-one dares to give. This is how one can return to the 'real life' and have that conversation about what fiction may offer in practice, and have the debate whether it is sufficient to acknowledge the conflict that exists in our society, or whether another system is needed (see Bal, 2017 on an exploration of a dignity-paradigm in relation to the workplace). To achieve this, democracy is needed, not only as a political system of representation and voting, but democracy engrained into daily lives, into decision making, and into practices of how work is conducted (Bal & De Jong, 2017). Top-down decision making and hierarchies are becoming obsolete, and better stories are needed now. This way the meaning of empathy can also be retained and revalued. Critics of empathy have neglected to argue that it is empathy that enables people to have human connections and to connect to other people.

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