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Narrative Empathy

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1 Definition

Narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition. Narrative empathy plays a role in the aesthetics of production when authors experience it (Taylor et al. 2002–2003: 361, 376–77), in mental simulation during reading, in the aesthetics of reception when readers experience it, and in the narrative poetics of texts when formal strategies invite it. Narrative empathy overarches narratological categories, involving actants, narrative situation, matters of pace and duration, and storyworld features such as settings. The diversity of the narratological concepts involved (addressed in more detail below) suggests that narrative empathy should not simply be equated with character identification nor exclusively verified by readers' reports of identification. (Character identification may invite narrative empathy; alternatively, spontaneous empathy with a fictional character may precede identification; Keen 2007: 169.) Empathetic effects of narrative have been theorized by literary critics, philosophers, and psychologists, and they have been evaluated by means of experiments in discourse processing, empirical approaches to narrative impact, and through introspection.

2 Explication

Nonfictional narrative genres may involve narrative empathy, but most of the published commentary and theorizing on narrative empathy centers on fictional narratives, especially novels and film fiction, and to a lesser degree, drama. Brecht's disdain for the evocation of audience empathy in favor of estrangement effects has had a lasting legacy, depressing the theorizing of reception in performance studies. Individual dramatists, directors, and actors may nonetheless draw on empathy in the form of motor mimicry; some spectators experience the transactions of feeling states involved in empathy, including real-world motor mimicry and emotional contagion (Zillman 1995). Individual readers testify to greater or lesser intensities of emotional fusion with nonfictional subjects of autobiography, memoir, and history, contrasted with fictional characters. Whether non-fiction arouses greater or lesser

empathy in individuals and in larger populations of readers and viewers is a question for future empirical work. The remainder of this entry focuses on narrative fiction, since empathy is most often discussed in relation to the impact of fictional worlds on readers.

Narrative empathy differs from two related but distinct phenomena: sympathy and the empathetic aversion that psychologists label personal distress. Sympathy refers to an emotion felt for a target that relates to but does not match the target's feeling. ("I feel for you" rather than "I feel with you.") Sometimes called empathetic concern, sympathy may or may not follow on an experience of narrative empathy. While in readers' narrative empathy shared feeling enables a living reader to catch the emotions and sensations of a representation (in other-directed attention), personal distress caused by unpleasant discordant empathetic sharing results in an aversive reaction (self-directed focus) (Eisenberg 2005). Extreme personal distress in response to narrative usually interrupts and sometimes terminates the narrative transaction: the distressed responder puts the book down, leaves the theater, or turns off the transmission.

The psychologists who study narrative empathy in laboratory settings have identified key features of narrative fictional texts, including high levels of imagery inviting mental simulation and immersion, that dispose readers to making subjective reports of being transported or of "having left the real world behind while visiting narrative worlds" (Gerrig 1993: 157). The phenomenology of transportation is taken to be a fact of readers' immersion; Miall explicitly links empathy with immersion (Miall 2009: 240–44). Mar & Oatley argue that "imagined settings and characters evoked by fiction literature likely engage the same areas of the brain as those used during the performance of parallel actions and perceptions" (Mar & Oatley 2008: 180), an argument that has received experimental support from research in cognitive neuroscience on mirror neurons.

Since narrative empathy involves sharing feelings as well as sensations of immersion, it is reasonable to inquire into the status of emotions involved in fiction. The evocation of real emotions by fictional narratives, a topic of controversy in philosophy (Yanal 1999), raises the question of the status of "fictional emotions" as opposed to the drivers of narrativity: curiosity, suspense, and surprise (Sternberg 1992: 529). Dewey lays the groundwork for discussion of fictional emotions in his broader statement (about all the arts) that "esthetic emotion is native emotion transformed through the objective material to which is has committed its development and consummation" (Dewey 1985: 85). This definition of esthetic emotion allows for a range of feelings, not limited to aesthetic pleasure in form and catharsis. As Yanal later writes, "Whether we are purged, pleasured, or made

flexible from emotions matters little. […] Some emoters may aim at catharsis in seeking out fiction, some at affective flexibility, others at pleasurable stimulation. Any of these counts as an end that renders emotion coherent" (1999: 30). The "paradox of fiction" questions whether genuine emotion can be felt in response to a fictitious character or event (Dadlez 1997; Hjort & Laver 1997). Readers do often become emotionally involved or immersed in fictional worlds, even when they are aware of the illusion of fictionality (Yanal 1999: 11). Some modes of fiction, such as postmodern novels, employ devices such as metalepsis deliberately to disrupt readers' immersion, but belief in an aesthetic illusion, or realistic representation, is not required for empathy to occur.

Gerrig (1993) argues that readers naturally experience narrative information as continuous with information gleaned from real experience and thus must exert themselves consciously to regard fictive narratives as fictional. In a follow-up study, Gerrig & Rapp (2004) suggest that real readers must make an active effort to disbelieve the reality of fictive narratives, in contradistinction from Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. Narrative empathy evidences Gerrig's contention despite the paradox of fictional emotions, for narrative empathy transacts feelings through narrative representations. Readers and viewers can block feeling responses to fiction by reminding themselves of its unreality, but it takes an effort, according to Gerrig & Rapp.

Narrative empathy can be situated in both authors and readers. Authors' empathy bears on fictional worldmaking and character creation. It may influence writers' choices about narrative techniques, evincing a desire to evoke an empathetic response in the narrative audience, even though exercise of these choices does not necessarily imply didactic intentions or a bid for an altruistic response in the real world. That fiction- writers as a group exhibit fantasy empathy (as measured by Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index [Davis 1980]) and test higher for empathy than the general population has been demonstrated by Taylor (Taylor et al. 2002–2003). At the creative end of the narrative transaction, authors' empathy is likely a core element of the narrative imagination, though much remains to be discovered about narrative artists' personalities and practices. Authors' empathy does not directly correspond to readers' empathy, arising from, receiving, or co-creating narratives. That is, while authors show signs of engaging in fantasy empathy (Davis 1980: 10, 85) when in the process of creating fictional worlds, readers of the resultant narrative may respond with fantasy empathy for their own reasons, not necessarily matching authors' strategic narrative empathizing (Keen 2008: 478–79). As empirical research in discourse processing reveals, individual readers respond variously to narrative texts, depending on their identities, situations, experiences, and temperaments (Keen 2011b).

Because empathy is a feeling experienced by real people, narrative empathy arises in the process of narrative dynamics, or the movement from beginning to end of the discourse (Richardson 2002: 1). Character identification of readers with fictional characters, within and across boundaries of group identification, may influence their experiences of narrative empathy, though it may also precede subsequent character identification (Keen 2007: 169). Some of the techniques thought to evoke empathetic responses have been described in narratological terms (e.g., free indirect speech, narrative situations, etc.; Keen 2007: 92–9), though caution should be taken not to oversimplify predictions about the effects of particular narrative techniques, which are protean (cf. Sternberg 1982). The empathetic dispositions that readers bring to the text have an impact on the efficacy of particular techniques. For instance, empathetic individuals tend to better grasp the causal relations between narrated events in fiction (Bourg 1996) than those testing low in empathy.

Specific narrative techniques of fiction and film narrative have been associated with empathetic effects (Keen 2006: 216). These techniques include manipulations of narrative situation to channel perspective or person of the narration and representation of fictional characters' consciousness (Schneider 2001), point of view (Andringa et al. 2001), and paratexts of fictionality (Keen 2007: 88–9). Other elements thought to be involved in readers' empathy include vivid use of settings and traversing of boundaries (Friedman 1998), metalepsis, serial repetition of narratives set in a stable storyworld (Warhol 2003), lengthiness (Nussbaum 1990), encouraging immersion or transportation of readers (Nell 1988), generic conventions (Jameson 1981), metanarrative interjections (Fludernik 2003; Nünning 2001, 2004), and devices such as foregrounding (Miall 1989), disorder, or defamiliarization that slow reading pace (Zillman 1991). Most of the existing empirical research on empathetic effects in narration concerns film (Tan 1996; Zillman 1991) although a number of researchers are investigating potentially empathy-inducing techniques using short fiction. Novels and stage drama are least studied empirically (though often theorized about), their length and performance conditions being, respectively, at odds with the current modes of empirical verification.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

"Empathy" has often been conflated with its subset, "narrative empathy." After a brief discussion on empathy, this account focuses on narrative empathy. For a history of the idea under the term empathy (the English translation of Einfühlung, or "feeling into"), emerging out of late 19th-century German psychological aesthetics, see Wispé (1987). The projected feeling of empathy involves responses not only to

sentient beings, but also to inanimate objects and landscape features. It separates aspects of motor mimicry, emotional contagion, and fusion of feelings from the older term sympathy, “feeling for” or compassion. The literary implications of sympathy have been contested throughout the centuries (Keen 2007: 37–64). In contemporary philosophy and psychology (Batson 2011), as well as in popular usage, the definitions of empathy and sympathy remain entangled.

Narrative empathy is often thematized in texts through direct representation of mind-reading “empaths” (Star Trek’s Deanna Troi [Roddenberry 1987-1994], Octavia Butler’s Lauren Olamina [1993]) or discussion of successes or failures of empathy on the part of fictional characters (e.g., the contrast between Ender and Valentine in Orson Scott Card’s Ender’s Game [1985]). Most usage of the term “empathy” in relation to narrative occurs in 20th-century works of literary criticism (e.g., Hogan 2001), especially in reference to Victorian, postcolonial, ethnic, and woman-authored fiction. Commentators on narrative ethics have often linked fictional representation of empathy (or failures of empathy) with empathy experienced by real readers. The situation of an individual reader with respect to authors’ strategic empathizing depends in part on aspects of identity and narration. When readers’ attitudes alter, or when they receive tacit or explicit encouragement to undertake altruistic action on behalf of represented others for whom they feel narrative empathy, the impact can be considered an aspect of ethics in narrative discourse.

Nussbaum (1990) argues that narrative empathy resulting from novel reading forms good world citizens. Further, it has been suggested by philosophers and developmental psychologists that experiences of narrative empathy contribute to readers’ moral development (Hoffman 2000). Some commentators assume that the empathy-altruism hypothesis regarding real-life human empathy and pro-social behavior (Batson et al. 2009) applies to narrative empathy, especially as it helps readers overcome bias (Harrison 2008, 2011). Keen criticizes accounts of narrative empathy that insist on moral efficacy as an outcome of reading, arguing that narrative empathy does not often lead to documented altruistic action (Keen 2007: 145). Patrick Colm Hogan argues that empathy for characters is inseparable from literary reading experiences and suggests that Keen holds narrative empathy to an unreasonably high standard of “moral heroism” (Hogan 2010: 267). However, Keen does not introduce the standard, deriving it rather from the discussions of Nussbaum, Hoffman, and others. Even so, empathy may be strategically employed in narrative for purposes of ideological manipulation. The Machiavellian use of empathy is well documented in real life as well as in fictions such as Ender’s Game.

A contribution to rhetorical narratology, Keen’s theory of narrative empathy

elaborates the uses to which real authors/narrative artists put their human empathy to work in imaginative character-creation and in other aspects of worldmaking, as well as theorizing readers' responses (Keen 2006). Rhetorical narratology takes an interest in effects on readers, especially with regards to persuasion. While no narrative text consistently inspires empathy in all its readers, who vary in dispositional empathy (Keen 2007: 89) and in their official and unofficial positions with respect to the text (Goffman 1956), study of the responses of readers belonging to different audiences reveals narrative empathy in action. A subset of narrative empathy, *readers' empathy* leads to differentiation in terms of belonging (Keen 2011a). *Bounded strategic empathy* addresses members of in-groups. *Ambassadorial strategic empathy* addresses members of more temporally, spatially, or culturally remote audiences. Broadcast strategic empathy calls upon all readers to experience emotional fusion through empathetic representations of universal human experiences and generalizable responses to particular situations (Keen 2008). Narrative empathy designates an affective element of the operations investigated by *cognitive narratology*. A subset of narrative empathy, readers' empathy leads to differentiation of readers in terms of their belonging to in-groups addressed directly by authors hoping to evoke empathy.

Empirical verification of claims made by narratologists about narrative empathy have been investigated in collaboration with specialists in discourse processing (Miall 2006) and psychologists who study persuasion and impact (Mazzocco & Green et al. 2010). Research into narrative empathy in cognitive science has investigated the role of emotions, including empathy, in narrative processing (Mar & Oatley et al. 2011). Narrative empathy has also been studied in relation to experientiality (Fludernik 1996), immersion (Ryan 2001), mental imaging, and altruism (Johnson 2011).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

Keen (2007: 169–71) lists twenty-seven hypotheses about narrative empathy that could be further theorized and, in some cases, tested empirically in collaboration with psychologists, social neuroscientists, and experts in discourse processing. Comparison of narrative empathy elicited by drama, film, and non-fiction could supplement existing research on narrative empathy and prose fiction. If a long-term study could be undertaken, longitudinal and comparative studies of groups of real readers would supplement the existing research on the impact of narrative empathy on beliefs and prosocial behavior. In any case, further research into narrative empathy will be best served by cross-disciplinary conversation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

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