How Does Reading Fiction Improve Theory of Mind?
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Introduction

How does reading fiction influence how we interact with others? Previous research has suggested that reading literature may increase skills related to understanding what other people are thinking (Theory of Mind, ToM). But reading “pop fiction” does not. Why do these effects occur?

Key Findings

1) People who have read less than their counterparts experience less of the effect of literature on Theory of Mind.

2) Stories that require the reader to infer the characters’ emotions may lead to higher scores on measures of ToM

Materials

Stories taken from Kidd & Castano (2013, Experiment 5)

Literary Story: “Corrie” by Alice Munro

Pop Story: “Space Jockey” by Robert Heinlein

Content Analysis: Character emotions are explicitly stated in the Pop story, but the emotions in the Literature story are often left unstated, meaning the reader needs to infer the emotional responses. This qualitative analysis was confirmed quantitatively using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015).

Methods and Results

Example Stimuli (Excerpts)

Space Jockey (Pop Fiction)

"Don’t look at me that way.” She waited, hoping that he would speak, regretting the side issue, and wondering how to tell him that her own fretfulness was caused, not by disappointment, but by gnawing worry for his safety every time he went out into space.

Corrie (Literary)

"There is no news to give him. No news, because there never was any. No news about Sadie, because Sadie doesn’t matter and she never did.

Preliminary Results

In the literature condition, people who read less experienced a bigger benefit of literature on the RMET task, F(2,23) = 4.87, p = .001. No such relationship was observed for the pop condition.

Conclusions & Future Directions

Results replicate findings of Kidd & Castano (2013): exposure to literature has an effect on ToM tasks.

This effect seems to be greater for those who are less exposed to fiction prior to experiment.

Results might be driven by different levels of “emotional cohesion” in the two stories. The more you have to infer the emotions of characters, the easier it is to infer emotions on the RMET task.

Future Goals for the Project

We are collecting more stories that feature character emotions that have to either be inferred or are stated directly. This will help us test the hypothesis that “emotional cohesion” in a text affects Theory of Mind task performance.

References


Procedure

Participants (N = 26) were randomly assigned to either the literary fiction condition or the pop fiction condition, and read one of the three possible stories for their condition. After reading their assigned story, they completed the RMET task, and indicated whether they enjoyed reading Less than their peers, as much as their peers, or more than their peers.