

## **Personal relevance in story reading: A research review**

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### **1. Introduction**

In the past century, emotional responses to literary narratives were regarded as unsystematic, personal and unphilosophical, and therefore largely excluded from scholarly discourse. With the recent cognitive turn in the humanities (Kukkonen & Caracciolo 2014; Caracciolo 2016), however, scholars are increasingly willing to consider the question of actual readers' responses to literary texts. Theories of emotions in reading have become more sophisticated (Miall 2011; Mar et al. 2011), acknowledging that responding emotionally can help readers better understand and appreciate literature (Robinson 2007). Importantly, these theories also acknowledge the role of individual differences in the personal histories and belief systems of readers as part of their explanations of how emotions emerge. This review article focuses on an undertheorized facilitator of emergent emotions in response to narrative, namely, *personal relevance*. Thus, it deals with the general mechanics of narrative processing, but with a particular focus on the individual reader, forging connections between humanities and science perspectives on reading.

A narrative can be defined as personally relevant if the information presented carries special importance with respect to the individual reader's self,

knowledge, or past experiences. Personal relevance is a key factor at many stages and levels of literary reading. It is empirically proven that literary texts, besides evoking fresh and new emotions, also activate existing memory structures, which then feed into the narrative experience (Cupchik et al. 1998). Studies show that the presence or absence of self-related, personally salient, and familiar issues in a fictional narrative influences, for instance, what people select to read and how they evaluate a text (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2012), what level of engagement they achieve (Sikora et al. 2011), and how much insight they gain from reading it (Miall & Kuiken 1995; Koopman 2011). Bálint and Tan's forthcoming study analyzed twenty-five in-depth interviews with readers of fiction and found that self-character comparison is an important component in highly absorbed narrative experiences. Participants frequently referred to similarities, dissimilarities, wished similarities with the protagonist when describing their subjective experiences of absorption in fiction.

Analyses of reading group discourse (Peplow et al. 2015) also attest to the salience of relating fictional stories, characters, and situations to one's past and present personal life. For instance, when discussing books, reading group members draw extensively on their direct experiences of the time periods and places rendered in the story (Swann & Allington 2009), bouncing back and forth between "on-book" and "off-book" talk. They even deliberately divide the conversational floor between themselves on the basis of story-relevant real-life expertise (Peplow et al. 2015). Readers sometimes report to employ these widespread "mimetic" (Peplow et al. 2015) or "autobiographical" (Collinson 2009) reading strategies with the express objective of deepening their knowledge of themselves and their life circumstances (Todd 2008).

In literary studies as well as literary education research (Fialho et al. 2011), personal relevance has been neglected, despite its obvious implications for reader experience and interpretation. The concept may seem an epitome of

the so-called *affective fallacy* (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949), an approach to literature traditionally derided for leading the literary expert's focus away from authoritative meaning production to personal idiosyncrasy. With the current interest in emotions, especially empathy (Keen 2010; Koopman & Hakemulder 2015; Burke et al. 2016), we feel the moment is ripe for a systematic exploration of personal relevance and related concepts. Indeed, experiments prove empathy to be facilitated by readers' own personality characteristics (Komeda et al. 2013), or personal life experiences (Koopman 2015a; 2015b; 2016), when similar to those rendered in a story.

The weight of individual readers' prior experiences may seem commonplace to the advocates of cultural theory, who make the case for underrepresented subjectivities in the discourse of and on culture (Booker 2010). Our agenda is distinct from that of cultural theory. Rather than postulating that the language used in particular works of literature necessarily has distinct meanings for the underrepresented and how these meanings are formulated, we review experimental and other empirical evidence on narrative processing in order to unravel which types of personal relevance are more likely to be powerful than others, which types of impact (e.g. aesthetic, therapeutic, persuasive) they generate, and where their power might become excessive or outright detrimental to reader experience. In other words, this review focuses on the workings of personal relevance as a psychological process. Psychological approaches to literary reading are sometimes met with skepticism in the humanities, because they seem to reduce away subjective differences between individuals (van Peer et al. 2012). This review attempts to show that the issue of personal relevance is precisely where subjectivist humanities perspectives intersect with the generalist ethos of psychology.

The review draws primarily on empirical literary studies, a broadly defined interdisciplinary field applying empirical-experimental methods of the

cognitive and social sciences in the study of aesthetic responses to fiction (van Peer et al. 2012). We also supplement the review with insights from the fields of psychology and communication, which use experimental stimuli in a wider variety of media that are not always fictional or not ostensibly presented as such. Focusing on the psychological processes of persuasion and belief change, psychology and communication often have the individual reader's characteristics and their malleability at the very core of inquiry. In addition, literary theory will be cited as appropriate.

## **2. Concepts of and around personal relevance**

In this section, we list the basic theoretical concepts applied to phenomena and processes linked to personal relevance. The section is structured following the nomenclature of psychology and communication, which is more unified and systematic in comparison to that of empirical literary studies. Where applicable, the concept presented is first accompanied by a review of the basic psychology and communication literature. It is then followed by a review of work in empirical literary studies that explores the phenomenon in question, albeit labeling it differently.

### **2.1 Personal relevance**

In psychology and communication, *personal relevance* is defined as the steady tendency in readers to ascribe relative saliency to a certain issue presented in a text (Petty & Cacioppo 1979). Terms synonymous with personal relevance are issue involvement (Kiesler et al. 1969), ego-involvement (Rhine & Severance 1970) and personal involvement (Apsler & Sears 1968). Readers perceive an issue presented in a narrative as personally relevant when it is intrinsically important, carries an emotionally loaded personal meaning, or has important effects on the reader's own life (Petty & Cacioppo 1979). Experiments show that

high levels of personal relevance enhance the processing of text, which means that people attend to personally relevant texts with more care and attention (for a review, see Petty & Cacioppo 1979). Personal relevance occurs together with increased levels of involvement with the issue dealt with in the text. This involvement has to be distinguished from readers' general susceptibility for engagement with narratives, also known as transportability (Bilandzic & Busselle 2011). Personal relevance is closely related but not necessarily identical to *prior knowledge* about (Green 2004) or *familiarity* with an issue (Hoffner and Cohen 2012). Under these latter labels, the amount of prior information or personal contact is mostly measured without considering the personal importance attached to the topic.

Empirical literary studies use varied terms for familiarity and personal relevance as defined above, including the following: recognition of aspects of one's own life (Miall & Kuiken 1995), personal truth (Oatley 1999b), familiarity with situation (Braun & Cupchik 2001), knowing from lived experience (Therman 2008), or personal experience with subject matter (Koopman 2015a). These terms serve different purposes. For instance, in Miall and Kuiken's (1995) Literary Response Questionnaire, which is widely used for the assessment of literary reading styles, the Insight section comprises items closely related to personal relevance, such as: "When I begin to understand a literary text, it's because I've been able to relate it to my own concerns about life." Insight is defined as the recognition of previously unrecognized qualities in the self and surrounding world. Braun and Cupchik (2001) and Therman (2008), on the other hand, primarily link personal relevance and familiarity to mental imagery. That is, they found that familiarity with the story situation increases the amount and quality of readers' mental images. In yet other studies, Koopman (2015a; 2015b; 2016) found that personal experience with story topic predicts empathy with the protagonist as well as insight and post-reading reflection.

The above literature treats personal relevance as one of many factors contributing to a more complex outcome, e.g., insight or empathy. It does not answer the question of what it may be like for a reader, in the moment, to experience personal relevance as such. In this sense, personal relevance was more closely explored by Larsen and László (1990) under the term *personal resonance*. Personal resonance (see also Seilman & Larsen 1989; Halász 1991) stands for the experience proper that a text relates to one's personal history or life circumstances. In these authors' account, personal resonance becomes manifest as a tangle of conscious associations from personal memory, so-called *reminders*. While all text elicits some reminders and all readers have some reminders when prompted by an experimenter, the degree of personal resonance is inferred from the *quality* of each individual reader's reported reminders. The more the reminders refer to the phenomenal detail of first-hand lived experience rather than, e.g., recounting events or second-hand knowledge schematically, the more the text is understood to resonate with the reader. Personal resonance is reportedly higher for literary compared to expository text (Seilman & Larsen 1989), as well as for culturally proximate compared to culturally distant text (Larsen & László 1990).

## **2.2 Perceived similarity**

Personal relevance has to be distinguished from *perceived similarity* (also known as homophily), a concept used in psychology and communication for readers' recognition that in one way or another they share some features with a character in a narrative (de Graaf 2017). Readers can feel similar to characters in objective, demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, nationality, religion, health status) or more subjective features, such as actual life situation, past life experiences, attitudes, or opinions (de Graaf 2014; Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). People tend to share the perspective and motivation of those mediated others whom they

perceive as more similar to themselves (Eyal & Rubin 2003; Hoeken et al. 2016).

Perceived similarity can be an antecedent but also an outcome of reading, meaning that prior similarity can have an effect on the reading experience but also that the reading experience itself can shape one's perceptions of similarity. Similarity in objective characteristics between readers and characters can prompt readers to exhibit more similar attitudes or opinions to the characters after reading (Andsager et al. 2006; Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). In one experiment (de Graaf 2014), participants read a story of a young woman fighting cancer. In one version of the story, the protagonist lived at home, whereas in the other version, she lived in a student house. Readers who read a version matching their own living arrangements felt more similar to the character in general, and also more at risk of cancer compared to readers who read the story with a protagonist that had dissimilar living arrangements. This indicates that similarity can enhance the incorporation of a fictional protagonist's characteristics into the self. In a recent study (Cohen et al. 2017), however, effects of similarity on identification could not be replicated.

Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) found that perceived attitude similarity is associated with *wishful identification*, defined as the wish to be like a character. Bálint and Tan's forthcoming interview analysis showed wishful identification with psychological features of characters to be an important component of absorbed reading experiences. People tend to report higher wishful identification with those characters who have the same gender and whom they perceive as more similar in attitudes to themselves (Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). However, story characters have been found to elicit wishful identification on the basis of different features depending on whether they are male or female (Hoffner 1996). Another study (Tsay & Krakowiak 2011) found that participants tend to morally disengage (i.e. accept immoral actions) to a greater extent when a character is felt to be more similar to them.

As aesthetic experiences, *wishful identification* and *similarity identification* have been teased apart in empirical literary studies (Andringa 2004). The former term refers to the reader's recognition of personal characteristics that the reader desires to possess, occasionally resulting in behavioral imitation (Andringa 2004). The latter term refers to the recognition of similarity proper, mediating outcomes such as consolation, support, or distraction in relation to the reader's life situation (Andringa 2004; Charlton et al. 2004; Koopman 2014), and also deepening their involvement in the text (Charlton et al. 2004).

Another distinction concerning similarity and identification has been suggested by Kuiken et al. (2004). These authors understand perceived similarity, which they term *simile-like identification*, as only one, possible but not sufficient, stage on a reader's way to self-modification through literature. Simile-like identification ("A is like B") is then distinguished from *metaphor-like identification* ("A is B"), wherein readers' selves are felt to instantaneously merge with the text not only at the level of human characters, but at a more abstract level of affective themes and inanimate forces. Readers come to recognize a character as a member of a class to which they also belong, thus realizing something new about life, a possibly lingering effect.

Empirical literary studies have shown that readers not only relate to positive features of characters but also to negative ones (Andringa 2004), presumably with specific outcomes for varied aspects of the reading experience such as empathy, participatory responses and transportation (Gerrig & Mumper 2017), or aesthetically productive mixed emotions (Hoorn & Konijn 2003). Exploring the potentially edifying power of literature, Miall and Kuiken's (1995) Literary Response Questionnaire also features items specifically targeting the recognition of one's own shortcomings in story characters, as well as feelings of wanting to change one's life on the basis of a read.

### 2.3 Self-referencing

Personal relevance, perceived similarity, and wishful identification are subjective experiences in a reader's consciousness, fuelled by the underlying cognitive process of *self-referencing* (Burnkrant & Unnava 1995). To understand the importance of self-referencing, we need to briefly clarify the psychological concept of self-schema. Self-schema is defined as a mental representation of our own self, stored and constantly updated in our mind (Conway 2005). It is a highly organized and complex mental structure containing memory traces of factual knowledge about the self (e.g. gender, age, nationality) and autobiographical events (e.g. important time points in life, significant places, associated emotions, etc.) gathered over the course of life (Conway 2005). Krishnamurthy and Sujana (1999) distinguish between anticipatory (future-oriented) and retrospective (past-oriented) self-referencing. When exposed to a narrative text, readers – either consciously or wholly subconsciously – often engage in self-referencing, i.e., search for similarities and dissimilarities between the content of self-schema and story-schema (Escalas 2007). Through this process, story content is connected to the reader's own past experiences, which can then become manifest to consciousness in above-mentioned reminders (Seilman & Larsen 1989).

Self-referencing is closely associated with other key processes of reading. Psychological studies suggest that self-referencing during reading improves readers' attention and recall of the text (Bower & Gilligan 1979; Klein & Loftus 1988). Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker (1977) asked participants to pay attention either to the structural, phonemic, semantic, or self-relevant aspects of adjectives and found that words rated for self-relevance were recalled best. Other findings in psychology and communication showed that activated self-referencing increases the persuasive impact of a message (Burnkrant & Unnava 1989), and readers' identification with characters (Chen et al. 2016). These findings are

most probably due to the fact that when readers actively relate their own self and life story to the narrative, they allocate more attention to the details and elaborate more on the topic (Cacioppo et al. 1982; Burnkrant & Unnava 1995).

As a subconscious mechanism, self-referencing *per se* has not been explored in empirical literary studies, where the reader's subjective experience, such as conscious reminders, is the main focus of inquiry. Finally, it is important to mention here that too much self-referencing can overtax the reader's attention and divert it away from features of the text, especially in cases of autobiographical retrievals (Sujan et al. 1993). We return to this scenario further down in our review.

### **3. Individual differences and situational factors**

The likelihood of being affected by personal relevance and related phenomena varies greatly due to differences in individual readers' psychological traits, their cultural and situational dispositions, and characteristics of the text being read. In most cases, the variation probably cannot be ascribed to one single factor but rather emerges as a result of interaction. In this section, we review the reader-related factors most frequently proposed in the research literature.

#### **3.1 Reading habits**

Like many other aspects of reader response, personal relevance seems to be more or less prominent depending on one's reading habits, reading style, and general attitude to literature (Miall & Kuiken 1995). Different reader profiles have been proposed, with different degrees of empirical corroboration, to associate most closely with self-implicating reading styles. In literary theory, the classical twentieth century approach was to deride self-referencing as an epitome of the affective fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949), reserved for the inexperienced, less "competent" reader (Culler 1980). A different theoretical

proposal was made by Caracciolo and van Duuren (2015). These authors concur that, of all readers, those who frequently read innovative literary narratives may be especially prone to self-referencing during reading. Caracciolo and van Duuren's argument is based on the idea that, in comparison to more formulaic text, innovative literature poses higher demands on cognitive-affective flexibility and increases awareness of one's own self as narratively structured.

Within empirical literary studies, Caracciolo and van Duuren's hypothesis is indirectly supported by Cupchik et al. (1998), who found narrative passages of higher stylistic complexity to elicit a higher degree of first-person emotional memories, compared to more stylistically straightforward passages. But direct empirical evidence confirms neither the assumption that self-referential reading is typical of less experienced readers, nor the hypothesis that it is a hallmark of niche expertise. For instance, a representative large-scale survey of German readers conducted by Charlton et al. (2004) revealed that the most "committed style of reception," in terms of self-referencing and the cultivation of personal meanings, was typical of the sociocultural "group that consumes high cultural as well as trivial offerings" (Charlton et al. 2004: 206) rather than of the sociocultural groups that favor either very demanding or very undemanding reads. Based on complex interactive effects found in a reader response experiment, a similar observation has been made by Koopman (2015b), as follows: In order to achieve the state of being "shaken up" by reading, "it may be helpful if people are already empathic persons, find something that connects to their personal experience in the work, and, perhaps, have *not read too much yet*, since that seems to spoil the surprising effects of literature" (Koopman 2015b: 439; our italics). We may conclude that self-referencing is not specific to a type of audience with particular expertise or taste in reading. Rather, it is to some degree inherent to story reading. However, the overall aesthetic impact associated with personal relevance may be relatively higher in non-expert

readers.

### **3.2 Gender and age**

A common notion regarding gender differences is that female readers are more prone than males to empathizing (Charlton et al. 2004; Mar et al. 2011; Koopman 2016), which is a type of response to real and fictional others reportedly mediated by similarity and/or personal relevance (e.g. Preston & de Waal 2002; Decety et al. 2010; Igartua and Barrios 2012; Komeda et al. 2013; McKeever 2015; Koopman 2015a; 2015b; 2016). Oatley (1999a; 1999b) reports a reader response experiment in which young adult female readers scored significantly higher than their male counterparts on the quantity of self-relevant memories as well as emotions elicited by stories, across both protagonist gender conditions. The author sees a connection between this finding and the fact that more women than men read fiction that concerns relationships (Oatley 1999a). Charlton et al.'s (2004) findings likewise suggest that, compared to males, females tend to identify more frequently with story characters and situations, seeking "critical self-confrontation." Based on a study of readers' autobiographies, Andringa (2004) also reports gender differences in reading styles from childhood to adulthood, with female readers reporting more self-referencing and identification. However, gender differences are far from universally validated in experimental research (see e.g. Bortolussi et al. 2010).

Andringa (2004) found that adult respondents recalled identification experiences more frequently in connection with children's books and with their earlier life stages than with their current life stage and reading materials. An analysis of the earlier reading episodes suggested a gradual evolution from wishful identification in early childhood (see also Hynds 1989) to similarity identification in the following years. This effect occurred in male and female respondents alike. A plausible interpretation concerning age may be found in a

study by Halász (1991), who explains a surprising lack of story-elicited self-relevant reminders (as opposed to reminders of mediated knowledge) in a teenage sample by the fact that teenagers simply have relatively limited first-hand life experience to draw on when reading adult literature. In sum, there is evidence that gender and age modulate the saliency of personal relevance in reading.

### **3.3 Specific life situations**

In addition, reading motivated by or focused on personal relevance has been connected with difficult life situations, such as personal crises, periods of grief, or illness. Experiencing such situations at the time of reading (Charlton et al. 2004; Koopman 2014) or having done so in the past (Goldstein 2009; Sikora et al. 2010; Koopman 2015a; Koopman 2015b) reportedly increases the probability of picking up relevance cues from fiction, especially if the story deals with serious existential themes.

A survey of cultural consumption patterns during periods of distress, conducted by Koopman (2014), revealed that those who generally turn to literary reading for coping with difficult life situations tend to be older than those who either turn to music or engage with neither of the two media. This finding was independent of any possibly confounding effect of age as a factor in overall life experience, as Koopman exclusively analyzed responses from individuals who had had distressful life episodes. While Charlton et al. (2004) identify literary reading for self-confrontation as a distinctly female strategy, a finding likewise linked to difficult life situations in particular, in Koopman's (2014) study, gender differences were only marginally significant. Not only the imminent experience of a distressful situation but also the sheer memory of it can affect how readers process literature with respect to personal relevance (Goldstein 2009; Sikora et al. 2010; Koopman 2015a; 2015b). These effects are

further reviewed below.

#### **4. Relevance domains and emotional valence**

The previous section reviewed the effects of dispositions for personal relevance on the part of the individual reader. Let us now proceed to the elusive nexus of reader and text. Which types of cues in the content of a text can potentially prompt personal relevance? Across centuries and even across artistic media, adaptations have been used extensively to bring temporally or geographically distant narratives “closer” to the recipient under the assumption that affective impact will increase. Early modern religious paintings depict Jesus’ apostles consuming roasts or eel at the Last Supper and Romeo and Juliet frequently wear bomber jackets on stage. Generally speaking, these adaptations attempt to exploit what Keen (2010), in a literary theoretical treatise on empathy and the novel, has termed *bounded empathy*. They suggest an easily recognizable link to one’s time, place, or other identity marker. There is of course no guarantee to the success of such relatively superficial manipulations. In our focus research disciplines, readers have been subject to experimental designs measuring the effect of various potential links.

##### **4.1 Personality trait, demographic, and locative relevance**

Personality traits are difficult to match between reader and story character. Komeda et al. (2013) made one such attempt in an experimental study that had participants read artificially designed micro narratives rendering protagonists who were highly extraverted, highly neurotic, or neither, while also measuring participants’ personalities along these dimensions. Personality matches between participants and protagonists predicted self-reported empathy, over and above measures of general empathy dispositions. Analogous reader-character match effects were found in the domain of gender role orientation as well (not to be

confused with biological gender; Jose 1989). Because of the complexity entailed in modeling personality traits in natural-length stories and comparing them to those of live readers, however, most of the research literature reports on more easily operationalized, demographic characteristics such as biological gender, sexual orientation, sociocultural background, and so forth.

Results obtained on the basis of literary stimuli are mixed. For instance, a cross-national experiment by Bortolussi et al. (2010) manipulated the biological gender of literary characters but found no effect of reader-character gender match on readers' evaluative ratings with regard to character appreciation, clarity of style, literariness, and interest in the story (see also Cohen et al. 2017). Green (2004), on the other hand, presented participants with a story set in the context of a U.S. college fraternity reunion, which was told from the perspective of a homosexual alumnus. They found that readers with fraternity background and/or familiar with the social stigma of being homosexual were more transported into the narrative than others. This suggests that more subjective and malleable identity markers perhaps allow greater potential for personal relevance than more objective demographic characteristics.

As outlined in a theoretical proposal by Kuzmičová (2016), the effect of literature can also be enhanced when a story is set in a locale or other general context identical or similar to the one in which one happens to be reading. This is personal relevance based on more or less short-term locative contingencies, that is, on the opposite end of the spectrum from stable personality trait matching. Vaughn et al. found indeed that when a story was read in a story-congruent season of the year, readers' transportation scores were significantly higher compared to a control group who read the same story in an incongruent season. Prentice et al. (1997) also found that students read an implausible story more critically if it was set at their university campus compared to when it was set at another campus, but attempts at replicating this finding were inconclusive

(Wheeler et al. 1999).

It should be noted that for all domains, personal relevance is also a matter of degree in the sense that a given condition can be relevant to the reader either directly, via first-hand experience, or indirectly, via second-hand experience. While it may not suffice to have second-hand experience of neurotic or extraverted persons to be more profoundly affected by corresponding story characters, Green's (2004) finding, for instance, applied to readers who reported just having homosexual friends or family members. Distinctive about subject matters for which second-hand familiarity is powerful enough may be their perceived intensity and emotional valence. In itself, belonging to one or the other personality profile or biological gender is ideally only sometimes, but not always, a source of intense experience. Meanwhile, a homosexual orientation may be harder to abstract away from everyday experience given pervasive social prejudice. Moreover, attending a college fraternity reunion as gay is the sort of circumscribed event in which sexual orientation may become especially experientially salient. In sum, for personal relevance to make significant difference, it should probably tap into matters important to the reader and the story alike. Bortolussi et al. (2010), for instance, note that gender similarity effects may have been absent in their study because the female protagonists in the stimulus stories were not portrayed as facing inequality issues. Thus gender did not stand out as a salient theme. Also, as Gerrig and Mumper (2017) point out, any effect of similarity will necessarily further vary as the salience of a given matter changes over the course of a longer story.

#### **4.2 Emotional valence and personal relevance**

It is no coincidence, then, that empirical studies exploring personal relevance from a more specifically aesthetic viewpoint mainly resort to stimuli where the potential source of relevance is less easily captured in mere trait or demographic

categories. Rather, these studies look into personal relevance relative to powerful “affective” (Sikora et al. 2011) or “existential” (Miall & Kuiken 1999) themes. Such themes are predicted to become salient in a reader’s mind due to specific fictional situations and concomitant emotions and sensory images. The more familiar the reader is with a real-life situation, the more rounded and imagery-rich their vicarious experience through self-referencing (Braun & Cupchik 2001), and the more salient a given theme (see Sikora et al. 2011 for a more nuanced account of these dynamics).

A peculiar feature of the situations and themes thus observed is that their emotional valence is largely negative. Negative emotions, or perhaps more accurately, mixed emotions arising from the portrayal of intense experiences, are considered the main source of aesthetic effect across art forms. This has led researchers to articulate, e.g., the Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions (Menninghaus et al. 2017), the PEFiC model of character appreciation based on a distancing-involvement tradeoff (Hoorn & Konijn 2003), or the idea that fiction-elicited sadness, albeit enhanced by relevant first-hand experience, is pleasingly “unadulterated with anxiety” (Goldstein 2009). All these proposals account for the attraction of negative feelings and experiences in art beyond tragedy by identifying mechanisms of emotional distancing occurring simultaneously with empathy and other story-elicited affect.

Various experimental paradigms have been used to study personal relevance with respect to complex negative experiences. Sikora, Kuiken, and Miall (2010; 2011), for instance, collected qualitative data based on Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* while also soliciting background information on the participants. They found that first-hand experience of personal loss, given a certain lapse of time after the traumatic event, deepened participants’ self-implication regarding mortality themes in the text. In mixed quantitative-qualitative designs, Koopman (2015a; 2015b; 2016) exposed readers to

narratives on extreme experiences such as depression, child loss, or grief more generally, and found emergent effects of personal relevance insofar that personal experience of depression led to increased donating to a related charity (Koopman 2015a), and that personal experiences of either depression or grief led to more direct reflective thought (Koopman 2015b; Koopman 2016) and empathy (Koopman 2016).

The workings of subtler forms of relevant negative experience were captured in a study of readers' reminders conducted by Larsen and László (1990; László & Larsen 1991). These authors had respondents in Denmark and Hungary, which were divided by the Iron Curtain at the time of the experiment, read a Hungarian short story portraying an incident of arbitrary power abuse. Subjects were asked to encode the occurrence and content of reminders elicited by the story as well as to rate it on a variety of items. Although there was no overt indicator of setting nor locally flavored narrative style, the two groups' responses differed. Compared to the Danish subjects, the Hungarians perceived the story as possibly taking place closer to themselves in time and space (Larsen & László 1990). As for reminders, the Hungarian participants' "cultural proximity" resulted in "the generation of a larger proportion of personally experienced, contextually rich, and vividly remembered events" (László & Larsen 1991: 23). Furthermore, readers' appreciation of the text was inversely related to the valence of these events, i.e., particularly enhanced by reminders of negative personal experiences.

In the latter experiment, not all reminders were negative, despite the negative theme that sparked them. Therman (2008) ran a reminders study using a more neutral story that also allowed for nostalgic or other positive emotions and memories to arise. Perfecting previous coding systems for the analysis of readers' reminders, she devised a taxonomy wherein lived experience, when subject to reminding, is coded as either repeated or single, and

either ordinary or special. In Therman's data, reminders of repeated and/or ordinary experiences appear to be more commonly associated with other than negative emotions. They outnumber by far other experience categories, but they are not sufficient for arousing the reader's interest in the text, nor a deep, conscious feeling of personal relevance. Again, it is by way of connecting single, special, emotionally charged experiences to the central theme (mental illness within family) that first-hand experience is found to be functional for Therman's outcome variable, that is, the understanding of higher-order meanings conveyed by the story.

To date, closer treatment of positively valenced personal relevance can only be found in studies with lower resemblance to naturalistic reading scenarios. Sperduti et al. (2016), for instance, report a study where subjects rated the intensity of their experience while being exposed to video clips labeled as either true or fictional. The authors found that participants only rated their experience as more intensive in the truth (as opposed to fiction) condition when the clips depicted contents corresponding to their previous personal experience, and only if the emotional valence of the contents was positive (as opposed to negative). This finding is proposed to be indicative of a particular emotion up-regulation mechanism (see also Menninghaus et al. 2017), activated in the observed encounters with negative contents in fiction. In a study conducted by Tsunemi and Kusumi (2011) participants were given a task before reading a short story: One group had to generate perceptually rich personal memories, thus activating self-schema, whereas the other group had to play a word game, a task unrelated to the self. When the researchers compared how much time the participants needed to read the story, they found that reading times increased for those who had generated perceptual memories. This effect was attributed to greater situation model elaboration, i.e., more cognitive resources being used for keeping track of perceptual information in the text. However, it was only present

when the content of the personal memories happened to resemble the content of the story. Valence was not measured, but the perceptual memories cited in the report were largely positive.

Finally, it should be noted that the potential effects of valence are acknowledged in theoretical accounts of perceived similarity (Hoorn & Konijn 2003; Andringa 2004), inasmuch as recognition of one's own shortcomings in a fictional character is likely to have different effects compared to identification with a character's positive qualities. This section reviewed the documented functionality vs. non-functionality of personal relevance across two interconnected domains: the domain of more "basic" variables such as psychological traits, gender demographics, or physical location, and the domain of more specific, complex, and intense (negative) experiences. The next and final section briefly explicates that personal relevance or perceived similarity can also become excessive in reading and how such excesses are manifested.

## **5. Effects of too much personal relevance**

The subject matter of a text may sometimes be experienced too personally, with the consequence that the reader's response becomes more self-centered than text-centered. This phenomenon has been identified in psychology and communication (Sujan et al. 1993) and empirical literary studies (Therman 2008; Sikora et al. 2011) alike. Sujan et al. (1993), for instance, found that when autobiographical memories are activated, people experience higher intensity of affect but pay less attention to the features of the text presented. Similarly, Mick (1992) found a curvilinear ("inverted J") relationship between message recall and self-related meanings, indicating that self-referencing facilitates memory up to a certain point, beyond which it becomes detrimental to memory. Participants in Bálint and Tan's forthcoming study also described feelings of too much similarity to the protagonist, with a distancing effect. However, this dynamic was

reported to be enjoyable and inherent to the narrative experience.

As suggested above, the likelihood of overly personal reading can be a matter of individual disposition and reading style. Some readers are more prone than others to projecting their life and self-schema onto text (Hynds 1989; Charlton et al. 2004; Todd 2008). In empirical literary studies, a notion of *optimal distance* between literary subject matter and the reader's current life has been proposed (Oatley 1999a; Sikora et al. 2010; Sikora et al. 2011). The difficult task is determining when someone reading for aesthetic and leisure purposes has strayed too far, i.e., when personal relevance and the reader's self-referencing have indeed overridden the text.

Focusing on variability in readers' reminders, Therman (2008) identifies a category of so-called *irrelevant reminders*. A clear-cut example of an irrelevant reminding provided by Therman is a reader being reminded by a literary story of a particular chore that needs to be done at home. While roughly complying with the definition of anticipatory self-referencing (Krishnamurthy & Sujana 1999), this kind of reminding presumably has little conscious implication for the reader's self- or story-schema in a longer term. *Distractive reminders*, on the other hand, is a term used by Therman (2008) for text-elicited associations to a phenomenon that the reader cares strongly about (e.g. religion), which nevertheless lack plausible support in the story.

Sikora et al. (2011) propose two other terms for excessive or borderline self-referencing based on a cluster analysis of verbal protocols recorded in response to narrative poetry. *Autobiographical assimilation* responses consist of simile-like juxtapositions between a reader's life events and events rendered in the narrative, without recourse to further abstraction. The authors consider autobiographical assimilation aesthetically inadequate due to the reader's intensive self-reflection replacing any attention to the text's language and sensory imagery. Another response category, *autobiographical diversion*, refers

to a tendency in the reader to recall physical environments resembling those rendered in the stimulus text. Autobiographical diversion is accompanied by elaborate sensory imagery that is based on the reader's remembered past and wholly decoupled from the text.

Therman's (2008) and Sikora et al.'s (2011) concepts all capture varieties of one and the same excess phenomenon. The text comes to serve as a springboard for unrelated or inadequately related self-referencing, however pleasing it may be to the reader. Another possible manifestation of excessive personal relevance is the reader's systematic non-engagement with or avoidance of certain textual features or the text altogether. Sikora et al. (2010) report that, in the same study in which readers were exposed to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the experience of severe personal loss had no positive effect on self-modification through reading the poem, if the loss occurred less than two years prior. In other words, readers for whom the text was excessively personally relevant because their memories of personal loss were too fresh systematically avoided picking up certain aesthetic cues in the text.

In a similar vein, Oatley (1999a) observes that readers' personal memories have maximum self-modification potential when they show neither too much nor too little emotional distance from the remembered event, a factor distinct from but certainly contingent on the passing of time. However, Koopman's (2014) survey of reading behavior in distressing life periods found no inverse association between loss recency and reading to cope, and a linear effect of loss gravity on reading to cope (see also Charlton et al. 2004). This suggests that there may be additional factors co-determining whether reading about human plights in fiction will provide solace during personal crises, leave no particular mark at all, or perhaps aggravate the reader's condition.

## **9. Conclusion**

Personal relevance is a form of narrative experience involving increased self-referencing, oriented towards the recognition and appreciation of salient self-related information in the narrative. This article brings two seemingly opposing (van Peer et al. 2012) approaches to reading, the general-psychological and the subjectively relativist, together in a review of the empirically proven effects of personal relevance and related phenomena in response to stories.

A great variety of literature can elicit self-referencing. The findings together indicate that readers engage with literature through the lens of their self-schema independently of the type of literature. Through the cognitive process of self-referencing, readers involuntarily compare story content as well as character features to the information stored in the representation of their own selves. An activated self-schema in turn can lead to a variety of subjective experiences, such as personal relevance, perceived similarity, or wishful identification, or in extreme cases, detachment from the narrative. These qualities of reading can help explain why readers experience different levels of empathy (Koopman 2015a; Koopman 2015b), insight (Miall & Kuiken 1995; Koopman 2014), self-reflection (Charlton et al. 2004), text-reflection (Halász 1991; Koopman 2016), overall appreciation (Larsen & László 1990) and engagement (Bálint & Tan Forthcoming). As for situational factors, personal crises (Charlton et al. 2004; Koopman 2014) or the self-schema instability associated with particular life stages (Andringa 2004), seem to increase the experiential potential of self-referencing.

Importantly, there is direct evidence against the traditional preconception (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949) that self-referencing is a mark of lesser aesthetic training in the individual (Charlton et al. 2004) or literary complexity in the text (Cupchik et al. 1998). Furthermore, the findings reviewed here suggest that large-scale similarities between reader and character, e.g., gender or sexual orientation, may not *per se* be enough for relevance effects to

arise, and that emotional valence may have a role to play in the process alongside thematic saliency. For example, a same-sex adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is likely to affect viewers familiar with the stigma of homosexuality to a greater extent than same-sex adaptations of plays where the protagonists' love relationship does not interfere with social norm (thematic saliency) or where its repercussions are less tragic (emotional valence).

Personal relevance can enhance engagement with complex narratives and facilitate reading. In light of the decline of volitional reading among young adults and the alleged crisis of literature as an academic discipline, the recent rediscovery of literature's beneficial effect on, e.g., empathy (Djikic et al. 2013; Kidd & Castano 2013) is met with great attention. It is also being translated into intervention programs (EmpathyLab 2016). However, it is unlikely that any particular literary story will exert the same affective and potentially edifying power indiscriminately on all readers. As noted by Caracciolo (2014), all narrative experiences tap into one's experiential background, that is, one's unique repertoire of past experiences – emotional, social, sensory, or other. If there is a strong discrepancy between the story and the reader's experiential background, little emotional or other impact can arise.

At a time when society in a large part of the world is becoming increasingly diverse, it can be helpful for literature educators, reading promoters, and care providers relying on literature, to note extant evidence on the role of personal relevance. Experiencing personal relevance could help students relate to seemingly distant cultures and acknowledge universal human experiences. Research desiderata that would facilitate new literary pedagogies and that we envision as important steps toward more complex understanding of reader response include an in-depth exploratory study and a psychometric instrument measuring the experience of personal relevance in literary reading along the dimensions identified in this review.

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