

THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE FORMAT IN INCREASING NARRATIVE TRANSPORT AND EMPATHY FOR FICTION AND NON-FICTION READERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether non-fiction (news) and fiction (short story) narrative formats could have different effects in increasing *narrative transport* and readers' empathy. The study was conducted using an experimental pre-posttest method and two groups designed. Participants of 62 students (male = 19, female = 43, $M_{age} = 21.6$) were randomly assigned to two groups of reading conditions (non-fiction vs. fiction), then their level of empathy and narrative transport were measured after manipulation/treatment. The measures used were the Narrative Transport Questionnaire and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The statistical analysis method used was the MANCOVA test. Differences in conditions (non-fiction vs. fiction) as independent variables, baseline narrative transport score and empathy as covariates to be controlled. The test results between the group multivariate test showed that there was a significant difference between the reading groups of non-fiction and fiction on narrative transport and readers' empathy simultaneously after controlling for the pre-test narrative transport and pre-test empathy variables, $F(2, 57) = 3.291, p < .05$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .896$, with power $\eta_p^2 = .104$ (10.4%). The univariate test on each dependent variable (empathy, narrative transport) in terms of text reading (non-fiction vs. fiction), after controlling for covariates (pre-test empathy, pre-test narrative transport), only differed significantly in the dependent variable narrative transport, $F(5, 55), p < 0.05$, with $\eta_p^2 = .087$ (8.7%), but not significant on the dependent variable empathy. The discussion is related to the familiarity of the reader towards the main character in non-fiction and fiction texts.

Keywords: reading; fiction; nonfiction; narrative transport; empathy

INTRODUCTION

People generally like to read fiction because it reflects the reality of life (Oatley, 2011). In the context of parenting and education, parents and teachers often use fictional stories to introduce concepts and moral values in children or adolescents. A study conducted by Gilbert and Fister (2011) showed that students have a much higher interest in reading than is believed and recommended steps for academic librarians to help encourage interest in reading, particularly by reading for pleasure which usually takes the form of narratives. Lazlo (2008) stated that narratives or stories have many psychological aspects that play an important role in influencing human psychological dynamics. A study showed that the use of fictional stories is quite effective in influencing children's self-concept (Appel et

al., 2013), and can also shape children's perception of moral misconduct, such as lying (Lee et al., 2014).

How can readers be influenced by the fiction they read? Research states that the impact of fiction on readers from the stories they read can be facilitated by narrative transport. Readers who experience narrative transport, will encounter the feeling of being emotionally and cognitively immersed into the narrative they are reading (Green & Brock, 2004). The phenomenon is symbolized by a feeling of personal presence within the narrative, the effect perceived by readers, listeners, or viewers experiencing narrative transport is characterized by a feeling that the narrative or "world" in the story they read feels real. Readers who experience narrative transport can encounter a vivid mental picture,

feel strong emotions in response to events in the story and lose track of time. Green and Sestir (in Rossler et al., 2017) mentioned that transportation into the narrative world is defined as an integrative combination of cognitive, emotional engagement, and images in a story.

In addition to the ability to enter the reality of the narrative world, humans are also capable of putting themselves in the 'shoes of others' which is known as empathy. This potential for empathy can also be a facilitator for the phenomenon of narrative transportation when reading fiction stories. Empathy is defined as an individual's reaction towards the experiences of those who are being observed (Davis, 1983). Although empathy in this definition is interpersonal behavior (between individuals in the real world), while the phenomenon of narrative transport is obtained from individual interactions with individuals in the text, however, because the text is narrative (the story of a character's life), it allows readers to respond with similar empathic reactions in the real world.

Empathic reactions to characters in narrative texts are simulations of real-world empathic reactions (Mar & Oatley, 2008). The function of narrative texts as a real-world simulation allows the readers to model, predict, and even live the reality of the text in the real world, one of the possible behavioral modellings is empathy. Empathy is the ability to put oneself in the position of others, both affectively and cognitively (Nomura & Akai, 2012). Empathy encourages an individual to perform prosocial behavior such as helping others, which is one of the social skills needed to interact with fellow humans (Calarco et al., 2017). Thus, reading texts with a narrative format will encourage readers to empathize through the narrative transport mechanism (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). Empathetic characters have a role in developing good behavior for individuals. If these characters can be enhanced by reading narrative texts, then reading them is an important activity to improve good character quality.

In Indonesia, the recognition that reading narrative text is an important activity, has been carried out through a 15-minute fiction text reading program that commenced with the Literacy Improvement Program. This program was launched by The Ministry of Education and Culture since 2015 through the Literacy Movement (Faizah et al., 2016). The purpose of this 15-minute reading program is not only to foster interest in reading, but also to cultivate students' character. The character traits include empathy which will encourage them to behave pro-socially. The researchers have found that there have been very few studies on the effects of reading on the psychological aspects of its readers in Indonesia. Therefore, this study is important to find out the effect of reading narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, on narrative transport and empathy on the readers.

According to Mar and Oatley (2008) through reading fictional narrative texts, individuals perform simulations, feel emotions (Mar et al., 2011), and experience thoughts that match the character of the story while reading. Readers also learn about complex social worlds through abstracting meaning, drawing conclusions, and making predictions about plot development and interpersonal relationships in the story. Indirectly, individuals experience the details of social interactions and the hard work of the characters in fiction. Based on this, Mar and Oatley (2008) concluded that by reading fiction, readers experience a growth in empathy.

Another researcher mentioned that the elements of simulation and learning from social experiences are not only found in fiction, but also in news that has narrative elements (Oliver et al., 2012). This study attempted to evaluate the extent to which a news story format, that has a narrative element, can initiate the process of empathy by producing a more positive evaluation of the stigmatized group. In the study, participants ($N = 399$) read one of the two versions of a story that described a health care-related

dilemma for immigrants, prisoners, or the elderly. It was proven that news (non-fiction) that has a narrative format can increase compassion towards individuals in the story, better attitudes towards stigmatized groups, more favorable behavioral intentions, and a wish to know more.

Thus, it can be concluded that it is not the matter of fiction or non-fiction that can affect the readers' empathy, but the extent to which the text can transport the readers (narrative transport). The individual's ability to be transported in a story relates to how the narrative is presented (Bruner, 2003). In fiction writing, which is more generally considered to have a narrative format, stories are carefully crafted to include conflict and a series of events that result in an action that escalates towards a climax, which then leads to closure (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Narrative formats usually contain elements of characters (a person, people, or other types of being, who experience narrative events), temporality (events occurring within a time frame), and causality (events affecting each other in a causal sequence). On the other hand, non-narrative persuasive messages (Schreiner et al., 2018) often have a propositional format or causal evidence to support claims, but there are no elements of plot and connected characters which are referred to in narrative formats (Oliver et al., 2012). Thus, it can be said that a typical narrative format can be built within forms of writing that were traditionally considered not to have a narrative format such as news, biographies, autobiographies or even texts about nature and technology.

A previous study compared the results of pre-test scores (baseline) of narrative transport and empathy with post-experimental results after reading fiction texts (Johnson, 2012). The study used the pre-post within a group measurement method to see the effect of reading fiction on empathy, pro-social behavior, and emotional perception bias. The results indicated that the participants who achieved high scores of narrative transports tended to have high empathy scores and

experienced an emotional bias that supported pro-social behavior. Another study compared two groups that were given news reports to read (non-fiction), the first group read news that had a narrative format and the second group read news that had a non-narrative format (Oliver et al., 2012) to see the difference in the empathy process and evaluation of stigmatized groups. The results of this study indicated that the group that read narrative news (news with narrative elements) was transported by the text, showed higher empathy scores, and had a more positive evaluation of the stigmatized groups.

In contrast to the two previous studies which compared narrative transport and empathy in each genre (fiction vs. fiction, and news vs. news), in this study, the problem formulation is that the differences between narrative transport in fiction and non-fiction texts in influencing empathy and narrative transport are unknown. The test was carried out on the narrative transport and empathy scores after reading the text, using the pre-test score as a covariate, to prove that there are differences in narrative elements or narrativity in influencing narrative transport and empathy.

METHOD

Table 1.
Pre-post Test Two Group Design

| | Time 1 | | Time 2 | |
|---------|---------|--------|----------|--|
| Assign. | Pretest | Inter. | Posttest | |
| R | O1, O2 | X1 | O1, O2 | |
| R | O1, O2 | X2 | O1, O2 | |

Note. Assign. = Assignment; Inter. = Intervention; R = randomization; O1 = narrative transport; O2 = empathy; X1 = reading fiction; X2 = reading non-fiction.

This study applied an experimental method, with a pre-posttest control group design. The assumption that will be proven is whether there are differences in narrative transport and empathy in the group that is given manipulation of reading fiction and the group that is given manipulation of reading non-fiction/news.

Participants

Participants were recruited by offering participation through a quantitative research method class, using a purposive sampling technique. After obtaining 62 participants, consisting of 19 males and 43 females ($M_{age} = 21.6$; $SD = 5.1$), baseline data was collected and followed by random assignment. All participants were in normal conditions and able to read the text well.

Materials

Manipulation instructions and measuring instruments used in this study were as follows:

Narrative text

Both narrative texts, fiction, and non-fiction (news) have the same topic, namely suicide. It was chosen with the intention of being able to induce empathy in the main character involved in the incident. The fictional narrative chosen was a story from the collection of short stories "9 Nadira" by Chudori (2009). The story was about a mother who committed suicide, from the point of view of her child. The narrative news story chosen was about the suicide of a K-Pop idol named Sulli, written by Putri and taken from the online portal Tirta.id (2019). In both texts, an expert judgement was made regarding the narrative elements by two fiction writers and two news journalists (example of questions: does the text present a 'beginning-mid-end' storyline, is the text able to engage the reader in the story, are there any characters that flow within the plot of the story). The results of the analysis of agreement between the raters, with the Kappa inter-rater agreement showing $\kappa = .64$ which means that the approval of the four raters was good. The number of words in the two texts was comparable, the short story text was 1,180 words and the narrative-news text were 1,171 words.

Narrative transport scale

The measurement of narrative transport used the Narrative Transport Scale (Green &

Brock, 2004) which consists of 12 items that measure a person's ability to enter/engage into a text (example of items: *When I read a narrative (story), I can easily describe the events in the text; I am mentally engaged in the narrative while reading it*). The reliability of the narrative support measuring instrument was moderate ($\alpha = .74$).

Empathy scale

Measurement of empathy using Interpersonal Reactivity Index Scale (Davis, 1983). The original scale contains four dimensions, namely, fantasy, perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress with a total of 45 items. However, based on previous studies, the dimension that is irrelevant to individual interactions with the text is personal distress (Johnson, 2012). Therefore, personal distress dimension is not adopted in this study and leaving 3 other dimensions i.e., fantasy, perspective taking and empathic concern with a total of 32 items. The results of the reliability test of the empathy measuring instrument were declared moderately reliable ($\alpha = .76$).

Procedure

Participants filled out an inform consent to participate in this experiment and then filled out empathy and narrative transport questionnaires as a baseline. Random assignment was performed using research randomizer (Urbaniak, 2013) software and the participants were split into two groups, the fiction reading group ($n = 31$, male = 10, female = 21) and the narrative-news reading group ($n = 31$, male = 9, female = 22). The two groups were then sent into separate classes and asked to read fiction texts (experimental group) and narrative-news texts (control group) for approximately 15 minutes. After finishing their reading, participants were asked to fill out the narrative transport and empathy questionnaires again, as well as additional open-ended questions about the content of the text to ensure that participants read thoroughly (manipulation check). Open-ended questions would then be coded with a score of 1 for correct, and 0 for incorrect. Two

independent raters who had been trained, assessed the readers' accuracy in reading text, and checked the inter-rater agreement. A debriefing was given to the participants explaining the correct approach to take when dealing with a suicide loss survivor.

Statistical analysis

To answer the question as to whether there are differences in the effect of narrative transport and empathy on the group of fiction readers and the group of narrative-news/non-fiction readers, a one-way MANCOVA analysis was conducted with the pretest or baseline variable of empathy and narrative transport as covariates. A one-way MANCOVA analysis was chosen based on a previous study which stated that the empathy of text readers is related to narrative transport (Bal &

Veltkamp, 2012) so that both dependent variables can be analyzed simultaneously. While the consideration of making the empathy and narrative transport pretest scores as covariates is because empathy can be a trait, but a part of empathy i.e., cognitive empathy is a skill, so it can be trained (Riess, 2017). Based on this, the empathy baseline for each participant needs to be controlled to ensure that changes after the intervention are the effect of the intervention, not caused by the initial conditions. Similarly, in the narrative transport variable, individuals have the ability to be transported by a text that varies depending on how long they are exposed to fiction reading or "lifetime exposure" (Calarco et al., 2017), so the initial conditions of participants need to be controlled by making it a covariate variable.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 2.
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Characteristics | Category | <i>N</i> | % |
|-----------------|---------------|----------|----|
| Gender | Male | 19 | 29 |
| | Female | 44 | 71 |
| Education | High School | 59 | 95 |
| | Undergraduate | 3 | 5 |

The results of the descriptive test after reading treatment (non-fiction vs. fiction) on the two dependent variables (empathy, narrative transport) are as shown in Table 2. The post empathy scores for the non-fiction group ($M =$

92.7; $SD = 10.3$), and for the fiction group ($M = 93.0$; $SD = 12.5$). The post narrative transport scores in the non-fiction group ($M = 56.3$; $SD = 7.5$) while the fictional group ($M = 50.4$; $SD = 9.2$)

Table 3.
Bivariate Correlations among Main Variables

| | Pre_Empathy | Pre_Narrative | Post_Empathy | Post_Narrative |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Pre_Empathy | 1 | | | |
| Pre_Narrative | .411** | 1 | | |
| Post_Empathy | .470** | .231 | 1 | |
| Post_Narrative | .097 | .253* | .358** | 1 |

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 3 shows that the two main variables, empathy and narrative transport have a correlation, both in pre-test and post-test

scores. The narrative transport pre-test score correlated with empathy pre-test ($r = .411$, $p < .01$). The narrative transport post-test score

correlated with empathy post-test ($r = .358, p < .01$). The narrative transport pre-test score showed a positively significant correlation with the post-test score ($r = .253, p < .05$). The empathy pre-test score correlated with the empathy post-test ($r = .470, p < .01$). This shows that the two main variables are interrelated. Based on this, the MANCOVA test can be carried out to test the changes in the two dependent variables simultaneously, by placing the empathy pre-test score and the narrative transport pre-test score as covariate variables.

Before testing the main hypothesis with MANCOVA, the assumptions test was conducted, namely, normality test of residual data, homogeneity test. The correlation score between covariate variable and the dependent variable must be significant but should not have a value of $r > .80$ (Field, 2013). The results of the residual normality test using Shapiro-Wilk were normal ($p > .05$, non-fiction group $p = .449$, fiction group $p = .098$). Levene's test showed that the variance of two groups (fiction vs. non-fiction) was homogeneous, both in empathy, $F(1, 60) = 2.12, p = .151$, and narrative transport, $F(1,$

$60) = 2.19, p = .122$. While the correlation value of the narrative transport pre-test covariate with the dependent variable of narrative transport was significantly positive with a value of $r = .253, p < .05$, and the correlation of the empathy pre-test covariate with the dependent variable of empathy was significantly and positively correlated, the value of $r = .470, p < .01$. These results met the requirements of the MANCOVA analysis.

The main purpose of the one-way MANCOVA test in this study was to prove the main hypothesis, whether the group of independent variables (reading fiction vs. reading non-fiction) is statistically significantly different in its effect on the mean scores of several interrelated dependent variables, in this case, narrative transport and empathy variables after controlling the covariates i.e., pre-test narrative and pre-test empathy. The results of homogeneity covariance matrices assumption test showed that the covariance values were the same between the two groups (reading fiction vs. reading non-fiction), Box's $M = 2.263, F(3, 648000) = .727, p = .536$.

Table 4.

The Analysis Results of MANCOVA Narrative transport and Empathy Simultaneously

| Effect | | Value | <i>F</i> | Sig. | η_p^2 |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Intercept | Wilks' Lambda | .696 | 12.453 ^a | .000 | .304 |
| Pre-test Narrative transport | Wilks' Lambda | .977 | .677 ^a | .512 | .023 |
| Pre-test Empathy | Wilks' Lambda | 0.812 | 6.620 ^a | .003 | .188 |
| Group | Wilks' Lambda | 0.896 | 3.291^a | .044 | .104 |

Note. η_p^2 = Partial Eta Squared. Design: Intercept + Pre_Narrative + Empathy_Pre_R + Group.

^aExact statistic.

The results of the MANCOVA test in Table 4. show that there are significant differences between groups (reading non-fiction vs. reading fiction) on narrative transport and reader's empathy simultaneously after controlling the variables of pre-test narrative transport and pre-test empathy, $F(2, 57) = 3.291, p < .05$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .896$, with partial effect size $\eta_p^2 = .104$ (10.4%).

The results of the univariate test (table 5.) showed the effect of covariates in each group. It can be seen that the narrative transport covariate $F(1, 58) = .138, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .002$ has no significant effect on either the empathy score or narrative score after treatment. While the pre-test empathy covariate $F(1, 58) = 12.235, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .174$, has a significant effect on the difference in empathy after

treatment, but has no effect on narrative transport after treatment. This shows that the empathy pre-test score must be controlled,

while with the narrative transport score it is not necessary.

Table 5.

Differences in the Effect of Reading Fiction vs. Non-Fiction on Narrative Transport and Empathy

| Dependent Variable | Effect | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η_p^2 |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| Post Test Empathy | Pre-test Empathy | 12.235 | .001 | .174 |
| | Pre-test Narrative Transport | .138 | .712 | .002 |
| Post Test Narrative Transport | Group | .011 | .917 | .000 |
| | Pre-test Empathy | .081 | .778 | .001 |
| | Pre-test Narrative Transport | 1.373 | .246 | .023 |
| | Group | 5.554 | .022 | .087 |

The results of this study indicate that the main hypothesis is proven, that the empathy and narrative transport variables are simultaneously influenced by the type of reading (non-fiction vs. fiction) after controlling for the covariates i.e., the empathy pre-test and narrative transport pre-test. This finding is in line with the theory that narrative transportation or being transported into stories affects the reader's empathy, especially the factor of putting oneself in the position of others (Green & Sestir, in Rossler et.al., 2017). Although, narrative transport places one in the position of a character in the text, while empathy places one in the position of others in the real world (Green & Sestir, in Rossler et.al., 2017).

However, when analyzed separately after a reading treatment (non-fiction vs. fiction), the empathy variable did not have a significantly different mean score, while the post-treatment narrative transport variable had a significant mean difference between the two reading groups (non-fiction vs. fiction), where the non-fiction reading group ($M = 56.3$; $SD = 7.4$) actually had a higher average narrative transport compared to the fiction reading group ($M = 50.4$; $SD = 9.2$).

Why did the non-fiction reading group have a higher average of narrative transport than the fiction reading group? Narrative transport is the experience of immersing or being carried away emotionally and cognitively into the

narrative (Green & Brock, 2000; Simons, & Green, 2013). Green and Sestir (cited in Rossler et.al., 2017) stated that transportation into the narrative world is defined as an integrative combination of cognitive, emotional involvement, and images within a story. So far, it is assumed that fiction is more capable of causing the readers to be transported into a story, because fiction has aspects that are considered efficient in taking the reader from 'actual' reality into the reality of the text through the characterizations in the story, temporality, which is the flow of the beginning, middle and end, causality which is related to events in a causal chain (Green & Sestir, in Rossler et.al., 2017).

At the beginning of the study, the selection of narrative-news and narrative fiction had gone through an inter-rater agreement procedure regarding narrativity (the ability of the text to immerse or involve the readers in the text) with the questions: 1) does the text present a beginning-middle-end storyline, 2) is the text able to engage the reader in the story, 3) are there any characters that flow within the plot of the story, and approval had been given by all experts both in the narrative-news and novel writers group, which resulted in a good agreement score for each group. The purpose of expert approval is to ensure that intervention instruments are equally valid through expert agreement (McHugh, 2012). In this case, the experts all equally agreed on the elements of the text that have the potential to

fully absorb the readers in the story. Basically, both types of text were able to transport the readers in the story. However, after being tested empirically, the results showed that the average narrative transport in the news reader group was higher than the fiction reader group.

Along with the development of journalistic texts, non-fiction (news) writing, narrative news format is also growing. It presents facts but, in a story-like format, which is able to increase the narrative transport of the readers. The study of Oliver et al. (2012) compared non-fiction writing (news) that presented a narrative format with those that presented a non-narrative format in influencing the narrative transport of the reader, as well as the readers' positive attitude towards stigmatized groups. The results of the study proved that narrative news formats can increase narrative transport of the readers and a positive attitude towards stigmatized group, compared to non-narrative news formats (Oliver et al., 2012).

The results of this study further corroborate that the narrative format in news is also able to immerse readers in news texts, even when compared to fiction which is naturally narrative. This supports the previous study conducted by Oliver et.al (2012) which compared two types of news, non-narrative and narrative, and stated that the narrative news reader group was more able to change their point of view towards different groups. This shows the importance of the narrative format in the texts, if it aims to immerse or involve readers in a story, as with the findings of this study.

Based on the definition of narrative transport above, the narrative news about the suicide of K-Pop idol Sulli which was caused by malicious comments from netizens (Putri, 2019) was more able to elicit emotional involvement from the readers compared to fictional narratives about a daughter who witnessed her mother's suicide (Chudori, 2009). One of the methods to get the readers involve in a story is through characterizations that flow in the storyline. Sulli, the main

character in the narrative news *died by suicide*, while the main character of narrative fiction Seruni was *a witness to suicide*. It can be seen that reading the story where the main character is the victim of suicide is more engaging and immersing for the readers, compared to a fictional story where the main character is only a witness to suicide. In this study, the role of the main character or protagonist (victim vs. witness) in a suicide incident, appears to be important in involving or immersing the readers in the text, due to the similarity and familiarity towards the main character (Van den Hende et al., 2012). A study Isberner (2019) also found that the main character can even change the reader's belief. In that study, the conducted experiments showed that narrative in the form of written texts or videos that portray protagonists who have a high versus low self-efficacy, can at least, temporarily influence self-acceptance, if the readers or viewers experience a strong transportation into the story. In this study, the narrative news about the main character Sulli, who was the victim of hate comments and ended up committing suicide was able to engage the readers better. Perhaps this is also influenced by the wave of Korean Pop (K-Pop) in Indonesia (Jeong et al., 2017). Initial knowledge, recognition, and familiarity with the character of Sulli made it easier for readers to dissolve in the narrative news about her suicide (Green, 2004)

This study also shows that there is no difference in empathy between post news reading and post fiction reading, indicating that the narrative format in both fiction (short story) and non-fiction (news) has the same influence in increasing empathy. This supports the statement from Johnson (2012) that the narrative format is an important point in presenting texts in both fiction and non-fiction such as news and even in the presentation of advertisements (Brechman & Purvis, 2015) to increase readers' empathy.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is that the narrative format in both non-fiction and

fiction has the same effect in increasing empathy, seen from the absence of differences between treatment groups after controlling for the empathy pre-test as a covariate. The average narrative transport of the readers after treatment in the non-fiction group (narrative news) was higher than the fiction group (short story). The limitation of this study was the selection of the texts, the study needed to pay more attention to the equality of the main character's role in the text. The main character in the non-fiction text (narrative news format) is the victim of suicide, while the main character in the fiction text (short story) is a suicide witness and this variation might influence the readers in the mechanism of being fully transported into the story as well as the empathy after reading the text. Future studies are expected to introduce equal characters in the text or pay attention to this as a variable that needs to be considered in the preparation of the study design.

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