

Understanding the Influence of Reading on Personality

Madhura Ashokkumar^{1*}, Aarathy R. Lakshmi²

ABSTRACT

Reading has its origin from writing that happened during the 4th millennium BC. Several studies in the past have explored the influence of reading on personality traits. These studies were quantitative in their approach, where they explored the influence of reading habits on personality traits. Most of these studies used the Big Five Personality scale to understand the influence of reading. In our study, we have explored the effects of reading from a subjective lens. We have explained how reading has influenced the individual's perspectives, covering domains such as the influence of a particular genre, socio cultural aspects as well as the functionality of reading, supported by the Big Five Theory of Personality and Theory of Mind. 6 participants were interviewed in this study. The participant's age range was between 30-50 years of age. In addition to this, we recruited participants who have been reading for 10 or more years and reside within India. Data was collected through audio-based mediums and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data has been analysed using Thematic analysis. The findings have been discussed using the Big Five Model. Excerpts from the participant's interviews have been drawn to understand how reading influences openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Apart from these domains, the results are also discussed using Theory of Mind to understand the ability of individuals to empathise because of prolonged reading.

Keywords: *Big Five Theory of Personality, Influence, Reading, Personality, Theory of Mind.*

Books have existed for over a thousand years. When the concept of writing came into practise during the ancient times, people wrote their heart out. During 2000 BC, one in hundred or one twenty people could read and write. Industrial revolution made it possible for printing large volume of books at lower costs. It was during this time; recreational reading became popular. There was a huge rise in literacy rates in the United States. With increase in literacy, more people began reading. Woman and children were known as the reading public. With the print revolution a larger audience had access to books. This phase was known as "reading mania".

Having understood the historical background of how reading came into practise, what is reading? Reading is a process carried out and used by a reader to acquire message which is conveyed by a writer through words that could be seen and known by readers (Tarigan, 2008). Reading not only enriches our knowledge but also facilitates our process of meaning

¹Counselling Psychologist, Montfort College, Chennai, India

²Counselling Psychologist, Montfort College, Chennai, India

*Corresponding Author

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making. Tarigan (2008:9) identified many purposes of reading including problem solving, readers interest in the topic, evaluate the writer's style of writing and identify similarities or differences with the plot of the story or the content. Studies in the past have explained how reading improves the physical and mental well-being of the readers. Literature has also identified the effects of prolong reading on personality. According to Allport (1961), "Personality is a dynamic organisation, inside the process of psychological systems that creates the person's characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors." Despite this general stability, developmental changes in personality traits occur across the lifespan (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). It appears that, from a dynamic systems perspective, art can be an antecedent condition for personality change (Djikic, Oatley, and Carland, 2012). Studies have suggested that the genre of the book influences our emotions. For instance, participants experienced negative emotions when the character was experiencing fear. Moreover, if the story had been written in second person (You) or were asked to imagine they were the character, they experienced more negative emotions. A study conducted in 2013, using fMRI, suggested that while reading a novel, the tension in the story activated various parts of the brain. The study also highlighted the effectiveness of reading in improving brain connectivity, particularly in the somatosensory cortex. This part of the brain responds to sensations such as pain and movement. While we mention pain, researchers in the past have found out that reading certainly enhances one's ability to empathize. A particular finding suggested that fiction reading improved the ability of the participants to understand the feelings and beliefs of others. From a theoretical viewpoint we can understand this as "Theory of Mind". Theory of mind (ToM) is the ability to attribute mental states to we and others, serving as one of the foundational elements for social interaction.

Studies have yielded mixed results while investigating the impact of early ToM on later reading comprehension. While some studies have found no direct link, (Guajardo & Cartwright, 2016; Kim, 2015, 2016; Lockl et al., 2017), others found direct relations even after controlling for early language skills (Atkinson et al., 2017; Boerma, Mol, & Jolles, 2017)

Studies in the past have highlighted changes in personality traits due to reading experiences. Variability in personality traits have also been due to genres, artistic merit of the writers. Most of these studies have explained the finding on a quantitative basis by measuring changes in personality using Big Five. The five broad personality traits described by the theory are extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. In this study, we have attempted to analyse the findings in relation to these traits, from a qualitative approach. Literature suggests that reading also enhances our ability to empathise. We have attempted to explain the findings in relation to ToM.

METHODOLOGY

Approach: The approach used for this research is phenomenology. As defined by Husserl, Phenomenology aims to produce an exhaustive description of the lived experience of individuals in relation to a phenomenon.

Aim: To understand the impact of reading on personality.

Objective:

- To understand the influence of reading with respect to personality traits such as OCEAN.

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- To explore findings in relation to ToM

Rationale:

In this study, we have explained qualitative data in relation to the Big Five Model and Theory of Mind. Considering the diverse culture of our country, this study highlights the effects of genre, artistic merit in influencing personality changes.

Sample of the study: the population of the study included members of the young and middle adulthood. 6 participants were interviewed for the study. science and art backgrounds.

Inclusion Criteria: They are middle and older adults, between the age range of 30-50. They live in India and have been reading for 10+ years.

Study setting: Considering the ongoing pandemic, the interview was conducted using audio-based platforms (Zoom).

Sampling method: Convenience and snowball sampling.

Methods of Data Collection: Audio calls were made using Zoom and audio recordings were made with the consent of the participants.

Data Analysis Method: The data gathered by conducting an in-depth interview was analysed using Thematic analysis.

Domains of Inquiry: This study focussed on understanding the influence of reading on personality from the Big Five Model. The findings have also been discussed from the social cognition perspective and Theory of Mind.

Ethical considerations: Participants were explained about the research process. Their consent was obtained to take part in the study as well as for recording the call. The participants were informed they will be receiving the analysis and once approved by them, the study will be taken forward for publishing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative study highlights the impact of prolonged reading in bringing changes in one's personality. Although personality traits show mean level change across the life course, there also appears to be substantial stability of individual differences in personality, even over several decades (Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Hampson & Goldberg, 2006; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). In this study, we explore changes in personality and related dimensions of well-being that are introduced by prolonged reading. The analysis is to be explained using Big Five Personality Theories and Theory of mind. To begin with, I shall explain some functionalities of reading that contribute to the psychological well-being of the individual. Psychological well-being is conceptualised as a combination of positive affective states such as happiness (the hedonic perspective) and functioning with optimal effectiveness in individual and social life (the eudaimonic perspective) (Deci & Ryan [2008]). The Reading Agency has found that reading for pleasure improves one's ability to empathize, interpersonal relationships and reduce the symptoms of depression and improve well-being throughout life. Participants recalled the benefits they derived from reading over the years. To quote them they mentioned "*companionship, forget my own self and live someone else's life for a few minutes*". Reading as a habit had

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functional benefits as well. The participants mentioned *“when we were growing up we didn't have TV or anything, books was another way of passing time, reading just for the fun of it, trying to keep up with others that were reading”*.

Through the interview process, I also understood how reading habits are learnt vicariously. Participants spoke about how they developed the habit of reading by seeing other members in the family read. Participants recounted *“My brother was an avid reader, so whatever books he would buy...I would read after he finished”*. Another participant said *“ I liked how our parents nudged us in that direction to read.”* One other participant said *“reading was actively passed down from my mother”*. Having understood the functionalities of reading and how reading habits have been vicariously acquired, I will be interpreting the analysis with the widely used Big Five Personality Theory.

In this study, we are going to be looking at how reading has brought out changes in the following 3 traits of personality as described by Big Five. The three traits being Neuroticism, Openness to experience and Agreeableness. Conscientiousness describes a person's ability to regulate their impulse control to engage in goal directed behaviours (Grogol,2019). With regard to being conscientious, a participant said *“and the book is about 3000-4000 pages and I had one and a half days to complete the book and send it back”*. Another participant said *“books like I said, it is not about quick gratifications. There are books that will do that, which do that for you. It's like a slow dance, you sit through it, you read, you go back and you understand, and the satisfaction you draw at the end of 600 pages is something which is different than flipping through”*. Through this study, I was also able to draw a parallel between conscientiousness and interest levels. Participants recalled that if the storyline was interesting, they were determined to complete the book. Thus, remaining conscientious is also influenced by the meaning of the task attached by the doer.

In the course of development, young adulthood, it has been found that people tend to remain stable on openness and agreeableness (Robert Watson and Viechtbaur, 2006). With regard to openness, we shall be looking at how reading has influenced changes in one's perspective about themselves as others around them. Openness to experience refers to one's willingness to try new things as well as engage in imaginative and intellectual activities. It includes the ability to *“think outside of the box.”* (John & Srivastva, 1999). A participant recalled that *“compare myself to that particular character that I have read somewhere sometime, and think oh that's how she dealt with it, see how they dealt with it”*. They further elaborated on how they were open to making lifestyle changes in response to reading self-help books. They said *“And I now try to do small things like, stop when you are 80% full, eat and don't stuff yourself.”* Another participant spoke about how reading has expanded their horizon at different levels. They explained that *“You know, when I moved from being a math major into IT and it was not my favorite area at that point in time I did it because the circumstances demanded that I go into it. So, one way to do it is to hate it and do it the other ways. change your perspective, right? And see what else you can bring into it from your side.”* Another participant spoke about their transition from fiction to nonfiction genre. *“I'm so happy that I started reading nonfiction as well because that was a genre I believed it is for people in the higher plane and not for me you know, like me,But I'm so glad I started”*. *“I think it has made me more open, yeah, by reading these books and learning more about my own failures, I think I've become open.”* Kraaykamp, G., & van Eijck, K. (2005). explored the impact of Big Five Personality factors on media preferences. The results of this study reflected that Being open, stimulates an interest in complex recreational activities. Djikic and Oatley (2014) said that reading promotes empathy. Empathy is also related to

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openness to experience. The more open you are to your own experiences, the better you are at being able to feel and imagine the experiential world of theirs.

Now we shall be looking at reading and agreeableness. Agreeableness refers to how people tend to treat relationships with others, this trait focuses on people's orientation and interaction with others (Ackerman, 2017). In the facets of agreeableness as listed by John & Srivastava (1990), they included trust and empathy. The following lines have been quoted as spoken by the participants to see the extent to which there is an influence. *"So I try to, I think, slowly, but surely have started giving people a longer rope, maybe than what I did earlier. So, I think I try to understand why somebody's saying what they are saying, rather than just jumping to conclusion and, you know, having a set idea, okay, if this is what they're saying that this is who they are, and this is how they will behave. But now I'm willing to, I've definitely started giving people a longer rope. I think, books offer you a wider perspective than you might otherwise develop, you know, you know, instead of looking at somebody and looking at them very two dimensionally"*. We could also associate this with Theory of Mind. Individuals who read more fiction perform better on tests of ToM (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). These results have been replicated in several other studies as well. A meta-analysis of correlational studies, for instance, has shown that frequent readers of fiction score higher on measures of empathy and theory of mind—the ability to think about others' minds—than nonreaders (Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). *"So if it is something about influencing perspectives, or expanding your horizons, I would say that every one of the books that I have read, have kind of given me a perspective about what the places are, what that person is or what that character is. So, it gives you a chance to immerse yourself in that character and find out if this person has this kind of a demeanor, then what kind of a character would that person would you get along with that person"*. Similar results were yielded by the study conducted by Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti (2014). This study revealed that when children identified more closely to a positive character as against to a villain character, they showed improved attitude towards immigrants. This could also be explained in terms of social cognition. Researchers have argued that fiction may impact social cognition for two reasons (Mar, 2015; Oatley, 2016). First, fiction may induce the process of simulating story characters—including their social, mental, and emotional experiences. In this way, readers may get extra practice with the same social processes they engage during real-world social cognition (Oatley, 2016). *"Some books sort of helped me understand that everybody has their own problems, gave me a better perspective of people also, why and how people react to different situations."* To support this, the study conducted by Kidd and Castano (2013) suggests that people transfer the experience of reading fiction into real-world situations by carrying over lessons learned.

Now we shall be looking at reading and neuroticism. Neuroticism describes the overall emotional stability of an individual through how they perceive the world. It takes into account how likely a person is to interpret events as threatening or difficult. Resilience and calm have been included under the facets of Neuroticism as described by John & Srivastava (1999). Participants recalled how reading has improved their ability to remain calm and develop resilience. *"I would say that one is resilience."* In an article on how resilience can be promoted by reading, by Esther Jones, the author wrote that various books help young adults visualise characters grappling with challenges. These books provide the readers an avenue to exercise their imagination to consider different ways of handling challenges.

Having understood how reading influences various personality traits now we shall be looking at some topics that I found it interesting to discuss.

Reading and Self Worth

Self-worth is an internal state of being that comes from self-understanding, self-love, and self-acceptance (Adam Sicinski(year)). Participants reported how reading has improved their self-worth. *“ikigai off the latest books that I have read, ikigai is one book that has really impressed me a lot. Before I started teaching, I was staying home and my daughter had moved from a cbse to a Montessori setup. So I was not working at that time. And at that time, doing cooking and cleaning and staying home was to a large extent it was bothering me, I'll be honest with you, to a large extent it was bothering me when I used to see people go out and work. And I used to wonder what I'm doing. You know, that kind of had a big question mark on myself worth, but not anymore. Now, this year, the last year that I've stayed at home, I've actually enjoyed staying at home and I find joy in doing small things. It doesn't bother me anymore.”* Another participant said *“The second thing that it has helped me do is come to peace with myself with what I am, I know my failures or my strength. And I don't feel any less of a person because of that. Because every character that I have read and have seen, I've seen embodied in books and things like that have shown me that everybody comes with a shade of grey. It's never black and white. It has helped me become more resilient and not so easily ruffled”*. One participant spoke about how reading provided her a direction to walk out of an abusive marriage. *“ I was made to feel ashamed for that side of my personality. And books helped me and I realized that what is happening to me happens even in a third world country like India, and it happens even in America, it happens in UK, it happens in Australia. I've got empowered enough to not go through it. So it gave me the courage to say enough is enough, I walked out of my marriage”*.

Motivation and Reading

While interviewing Participants recalled specific books characters that have been a source of motivation. One participant said *“I start looking at areas in which I can improve, and I start, not just both physically and mentally, you know, there are books where I've read where the character is so much more fitter, and you know, stronger and so yeah, I mean, I honestly speaking, sometimes I look at the character for small things like motivation to even get down and go for a walk.”* Another participant said *“So you face certain limitations, or you face constraints at points in time, which make you and you don't have the internal motivation or the internal energy to drive you forward. Or it feels like a dead end sometimes when you're faced with those kinds of situations and books. help you overcome that. They give you a sense of direction and range of alternatives to consider.”* One other participant said *“I remember being extremely impressed by Scarlett O'Hara in Gone with the Wind. And at the end of that, you know, when her life you can say is practically in shambles. She can still say, tomorrow's another day and go off to bed. No, I like the kind of grit and that, you know, spine of skill that she shows.*

Influence of Genre on Personality

Genre was not responsible for significant variability in Personality Change Index (Djikic, Oatley & Carland,2012). Contrary to this, in this study we have found how genre can impact one's personality. While transcending developmental stages, participants reported their appreciation of self-help books and recalled how these books have helped them in significant ways. A participant recalled *“we studied the yoga sutra. And that has had a huge impact, huge impact, because it gives you a perspective where you look at yourself as a body mind construct, and then there is something beyond that, what is the intelligence that's working? So, a deeper understanding of the self of how the self operates, the mind operates basically. And that has, I think, definitely made me a person who I am today. I mean, trying to be very conscious”*. Self-help books have not only helped participants make lifestyle

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changes but have also helped them to empathise with others, remain calm and develop a sense of resilience.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we discussed how prolonged reading influences one's personality. We have explained our findings in association with concepts such as the Big Five Personality Theory, Theory of Mind and Social Cognition. In this study, we have seen how reading influences traits such as openness to experience, neuroticism and agreeableness. While discussing agreeableness we have attempted to explain the influence of reading using theory of mind. While several studies in the past have provided a quantified explanation for influences of reading on personality, we have made an attempt to present the same through a qualitative approach. Considering the diverse culture of our country, we have taken into account religious and philosophical texts to help us deepen our understanding of the influences of reading on personality.

Limitations of the study and Future scope

The participants were from Bengaluru and Chennai. Drawing participants from different cultures can help us understand the role of culture on reading habits and how that influences one's personality. Future studies can focus on reading habits and social cognition, attachment styles, the influence of language on personality.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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