

## Casual Reading Habits and Interpersonal Reactivity:

### A Correlational Study

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#### ABSTRACT

Empathy, as a factor has been widely researched about in counselling and clinical situations. Most recently, it is being explored in terms of positive psychology. Several studies have linked empathy to general well-being and life satisfaction of people. It has also shown a reduction in social conflicts and increased peace-keeping intentions. Therefore it is important to understand factors that can lead to an increase in empathy in individuals. This is a study that attempted to understand if there is a relationship between casual reading and interpersonal reactivity-which measures dimensions of cognitive and emotional empathy. Reading has been linked to several benefits for people among which are also emotional and cognitive maturity. This study tried to understand if these benefits extend to include empathy as well. The respondents were all post-graduate students chosen through convenient sampling method. For this purpose, the researcher developed a Casual Reading Checklist which was aimed at understanding the frequency and range of the casual reading habits of people. A total reading habit score was derived out of the same. Along with this, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davies, 1980) was administered to respondents. This scale helps understand empathy over four distinct dimensions- Perspective-taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern and Personal Distress. A correlation analysis was undertaken to check if there was a relationship between the dimensions of empathy and casual reading habits. Results indicated a significant correlation between casual reading habits and the combined score from the dimensions of Cognitive Empathy. This was an attempt to understand if there is a possibility of using the habit of reading in the form of psychotherapy for general well-being and life satisfaction-at the individual as well as the societal level.

**Keywords:** *Bibliotherapy, Reading, Empathy*

**R**eading books is an important hobby that has existed from a long time back. But with the advent of the television and video games, the interest in reading seems to have declined quite significantly, especially among the youth. While there are numerous studies (Keepers, 1990,

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Lieberman, 1997, Granic, Lobel and Engels, 2014, Kozak, 2015) which detail the advantages and limitations of the use of the electronic medium as recreational activities, there is a gap in understanding why reading as a hobby has significantly declined in recent times especially in the Indian context and following this, it is therefore important to understand the repercussions of such a decline. If we can attempt to link reading to specific positive attributes, we can logically argue that a decline in these positive attributes can be directly connected to lack of reading.

There are a lot of supporting studies which evidences that reading for pleasure helps in both educational and personal development (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). This means even casual reading helps with academic purposes as well as to help the person to individually develop. In fact, in one survey (OECD, 2002), it was shown that reading enjoyment was a far better indicator for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status. Research has shown that casual reading is one hobby that has both emotional and social consequences. It has also shown that benefits of reading for pleasure include increased general knowledge as well (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). From all this, it can definitely be said that casual reading has several benefits- both academically as well as psychologically. Since the population being considered for the current study are students- this makes it important to consider both sides of the benefits.

Coming to the Indian scenario, according to the National Youth Readership Survey, 2010, Television remains the most popular source of information for the youth followed by newspapers. Half of them use television purely for entertainment and about 63% read newspapers to gather news and to check on current affairs. Only 10% of youth read for entertainment or pleasure. The survey says that readership of books, newspapers and magazines increases with increasing level of education but decreases with increasing age. This same trend is noticed especially in relation to reading books during leisure. Only 4% of the youth were shown to read on working days though. These trends clearly indicate that reading for pleasure has become an afterthought for most of the youth. Increasingly we are also noticing the fact that there is a decrease in the resilience trait among the youth these days and that there is an increase in general unhappiness among students especially because of the work-load at educational institutions and also because of the added amount of pressure on them these days. To help curb these detrimental effects, it may be important for students to take up casual reading to help reduce these negative effects.

Before we try to understand the relationship between the concepts of casual reading and empathy, it is essential to understand the meaning of the latter term. It can be defined as 'an important component of social cognition that contributes to one's ability to understand and respond adaptively to others' emotions, succeed in emotional communication, and promote prosocial behavior' (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar and Levine, 2009). Simply put, empathy refers to putting ourselves in another's shoes and understanding from their point of view. So empathy is not limited to psychology professionals but can be extended to everyone to refer to their

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sensitivity in understanding an alternate point of view. This is important to reduce conflicts and thus helps maintain the well being of a person.

Davis (1983) came up with a model to help understand the concept of empathy. The model views the concept as a set of four distinct but related constructs- two of which are cognitive and the other two are affective or emotional by nature. The two cognitive constructs- Perspective Taking and Fantasy represent two types of antecedents of experiencing emotions in response to emotions felt by others. The emotional constructs of Empathic Concern and Personal Distress represent two different ways of vicariously participating in other people's emotions. So the first two constructs cumulatively represent Cognitive Empathy and the latter two comprise Emotional Empathy. Many studies have already revealed that Cognitive Empathy is very important in terms of social functioning (Smith, 2010). Since all of us live within a social context, it is essential that we learn how to be able to understand each other and this is what Cognitive Empathy facilitates for us. It helps in facilitating conversation and social interaction by helping us understand the appropriateness of the context. Emotional Empathy helps us in understanding what others are feeling in the current context and further more helps us relate our own emotions with what others are experiencing. So the higher the emotional empathy in a person, the more we can relate to others' emotional experiences and display more pro-social behaviors.

Therefore the current study attempts to see if there is a relationship that can exist between casual reading habits or reading for pleasure and cognitive and emotional constructs of empathy. If there is a relationship that is proven to exist, then further testing can be done to understand the true nature of the relationship as well as the other psychological benefits of casual reading. Empathy has been linked to general well-being and life satisfaction in several studies (Bourghalt et.al 2015; Shanafelt et.al 2005; Lee, Brennan and Daly 2001). Increased levels of empathy can therefore signify the presence of elevated scores on well being and life satisfaction among people. This means that there is a chance of using reading habits to improve on empathy levels in people while this in turn leads to better life satisfaction among people. This can be used as a form of therapy during the counselling process.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The main objective of the study was to study the relationship between casual reading habits and dimensions of Interpersonal Reactivity among postgraduate students. Null hypotheses was considered for the current study which stated- 'There is no relationship between casual reading habits and dimensions of Interpersonal Reactivity among postgraduate students.' The sample consisted of 40 post-graduate students who were chosen using convenient sampling. The aim was to initially establish whether a relationship existed or not between the two variables and therefore a higher sample size was not taken.

The tools utilized were a researcher developed Casual Reading Habits checklist and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The Casual Reading Habits checklist was developed based on

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previous surveys conducted around the world to assess reading habits. Questions were adapted to suit the current context. The checklist looked into understanding not only the duration or frequency of usage but also into the range of reading in terms of the number of categories being read. Questions ranged from understanding the level of enjoyment experienced from reading to the medium of books. Quantifying the answers through the means of a Likert Scale, a total Casual Reading Habits score was derived for each one. The total possible score was 38.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index or IRI (Davis, 1980) is composed of 28 items. This scale is based on Davis' model of empathy which means the scale measures four dimensions of empathy. Each dimension is measured over seven items. The IRI has demonstrated good test-retest reliability, and convergent validity is indicated by correlations with other established empathy scales. The four scales are as follows-

- ❖ The Fantasy Scale- This scale measures the tendency to get caught up in fictional stories and imagine oneself in the same situations as fictional characters. It can alternatively be called as imaginative empathy. This subscale basically assesses the tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters in books, movies, and plays.
- ❖ The Perspective Taking scale- This measures the tendency to take the psychological point of view of others. This means that one is able to think from the point of view of others.
- ❖ The Empathic Concern scale- This measures sympathy and concern for others. While perspective taking looks into thinking from others' point of view, Empathic concern deals with the ability to feel for the others. This subscale measures other-oriented feelings of sympathy and concern for others in distress.
- ❖ The Personal Distress scale- This measures the kind of feelings that gets in the way of helping others. This means it addresses the tendency to experience distress in stressful situations. Basically this subscale assesses self-oriented anxiety when experiencing others in distress.

## RESULTS

The sample being considered was fully composed of females with an average age of 22.25 years. The table below presents the result of correlation. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was the statistical technique used to analyse the data. To not only consider the four dimensions individually, but also to check if reading books has an overall effect on cognitive empathy or emotional empathy, the combined scores of Fantasy and Perspective taking have been combined to form the former and the Empathic concern and Personal Distress scores have been combined to form the latter.

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**Table: Showing the correlational values between the variables-  
N=40**

	Casual Reading Habits Score	
	Pearson Correlation	Significance
<b>Perspective Taking</b>	0.30	0.06
<b>Fantasy Scale</b>	0.53	0.00**
<b>Emphatic Concern</b>	0.23	0.15
<b>Personal Distress</b>	0.21	0.18
<b>Cognitive Empathy</b>	0.53	0.00**
<b>Emotional Empathy</b>	0.03	0.85

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

The above table clearly shows that there is a significant correlation between Casual Reading Habits Score and Fantasy scale of empathy as well as the combined score of Cognitive empathy. Perspective taking is another subscale which is almost significant.

As can be seen from the table, the correlation value which showcases the relationship between casual reading habits score and fantasy scale is 0.53 which is significant at the 0.01 level. This correlation value can be interpreted to mean a strong positive correlation between the two variables. This essentially means that both reading habits and the fantasy dimension of empathy are both related in such a way that an increase in one leads to an increase in the other. Though a regression analysis has to be carried out to confirm the direction of the relationship, it is evident that there is a strong enduring relationship between the two. This relationship shows that reading may help increase the imaginative empathy of a person and that they will be able to imagine from the other person's point of view much quicker. This could be because in books, situations are elaborately explained as well as the corresponding thoughts. By reading extensively, one develops a sense of connection between specific situations and the thoughts and would use this from the repertoire to understand in real life too.

The other aspect that has been found significant is the relationship between Cognitive Empathy as a whole and Casual reading habits. In a sense, it is mirroring the relationship between the individual dimension of fantasy. The values are also the same. This shows that books help specifically help the person understand the thoughts that the other person may be experiencing at a given time. This type of empathy is quite necessary in real-life scenarios because of the fact that once we are able to understand what the other person is thinking about, we are also able to react better in such a situation as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

The main purpose for this study was to check the viability of the usage of the casual reading as a form of therapy to enhance empathy which in turn can help influence the general well-being and life satisfaction of people. Now that a correlation has been established among the variables, it

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can be further tested with a larger cross-sectional sample size and a direction established. Once the proof of reading habits influencing empathy levels has been accurately ascertained, it can be researched on to find out what other psychological and therapeutic benefits casual reading can provide. This is already being done through research on Bibliotherapy. The current study shows quite clearly that a strong positive relationship does exist between casual reading and cognitive empathy. Thus it can be said that it is important for students to keep up with casual reading which can indirectly influence our level of well-being and life satisfaction in the end.

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