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## Does Personality Organization Affect Empathic Perspective-taking?

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Morgun Elliot Custer entitled "Does Personality Organization Affect Empathic Perspective-taking?". I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Psychology.

Timothy Hulsey, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Leticia Flores, Heather Hirschfeld, Garry Shteynberg

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Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# **Does Personality Organization Affect Empathic Perspective-taking?**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Morgun Elliot Custer

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## Abstract

Empathic perspective-taking is the psychological process that enables us to identify and understand other people's emotions. A recent study published in *Science* (Kidd & Castano, 2013) suggests that reading literary fiction can improve empathic perspective-taking abilities. In the present investigation, I present a history of scientific efforts to explain and measure empathy as well as how empathic perspective-taking is diminished in individuals with personality disorders. I review efforts at an extension of existing research that resulted in a failed replication with important repercussions. I outline potential directions for researchers looking to investigate the relationship of empathic perspective-taking, literary fiction, and personality organization.

*Keywords:* literary fiction, empathy, empathic perspective-taking, personality organization, mentalization, Reflective Function, Theory of Mind.

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## Chapter I: Review of the Literature

### Empathy as a Construct

Empathy is a complex psychological phenomenon that allows human beings to understand the mental life of another person. Empathy allows us to operate in a world of others and is vital to our understanding of social relations. In contemporary psychology, empathy is commonly defined as “... a complex form of psychological inference in which observation, memory, knowledge, and reasoning are combined to yield insights into the thoughts and feelings of others” (Ickes, 1997, p.2). Empathy is understood to operate flexibly, incorporating multiple social-cognitive processes, including affective and cognitive dimensions. Furthermore, integration of these cognitive and affective dimensions only becomes possible once the individual is capable of fully differentiating self from other (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

However, different subfields of psychology have created their own terminology to describe empathic processes. These differences make comparisons of empathy studies difficult; divergent terminologies prohibit the integration of perspectives in a meaningful way. This has unfortunate consequences on our collective understanding of empathy and how it operates, as researchers from divergent theoretical camps use research that operates under fundamentally different conceptualizations without addressing these differences.

In the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), perhaps the most widely used empathy self-report measure, empathy is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprised of affective and cognitive dimensions, as well as sympathetic concern for those in need (labelled “Empathic Concern”). Most researcher psychologists do not conceptualize empathy to include sympathetic concern, however, and instead focus only on the cognitive

(Cognitive Theory of Mind) and affective (Affective Theory of Mind) dimensions of empathic perspective-taking. It makes intuitive sense to separate these processes; one may be able to feel beneficence towards a suffering other without having an accurate understanding of their internal state. Likewise, one may appreciate how another is feeling without experiencing warmth or kindness towards them. In the following pages, I choose the term “empathic perspective-taking” as an explicit reference to our ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others rather than our capacity to feel concern for suffering others.

### **Theodor Lipps and Empathy as ‘Imaginative Projection’**

Contemporary conceptualizations of empathy can be traced back to the writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic philosopher, Theodor Lipps. Lipps used the word “Einfühlung” (which roughly translates as “feeling-into”) as the psychological capacity to admire aesthetics and beauty in the natural world. Lipps was not of the opinion that we can appraise artwork in an objective sense, as if they had a meaning independent from the viewer. Rather, we project parts of our own psychology into aesthetic objects and derive meaning from these projections (Zahavi, 2014; Lipps, 1909).

For Lipps, every human is a subject that lives in a world of objects, including things, persons, and ideas. He believed we are epistemically limited in our capacity know the external world objectively. Our subjective world becomes the lens through which we interpret all external stimuli. Lipps further argued that we disavow the role our own psychology imparts on our experience of objects. Instead, we experience the seemingly independent other as having the very



intentions we unconsciously prescribed to them. Dan Zahavi beautifully summarizes the ramifications of this conceptualization of empathy:

One implication of Lipps' model is that there are rather strict limitations to what I can come to understand empathically. The imitated expression can only evoke an affective state in myself that resembles the affective state of the other if I myself have had the affective state in question in the past... Lipps' account of empathy doesn't allow me to recognize anything in the other that is new, anything that I am not familiar with, anything that I haven't put there myself. Lipps repeatedly speaks of other individuals as multiplications of one's own ego, that is, as products of empathic self-identification. (p.105, Zahavi, 2014)

The consequences for this way of understanding empathy are important. If our ability to empathize with others depends upon our own psychological capabilities, then people vary in the projections they impart onto objects. This, in turn, creates different experience of those objects. This explains why different individuals can have radically different experiences of a work of art, or different interpretations of film or literature. This imaginative projection hypothesis not only provides a means of understanding our experience of aesthetic objects, but also provides a model for why individuals interpret the same social interactions in divergent ways.

However, the fact that other human beings have their own subjectivity means that the projections we place onto others may or may not accurately reflect the affective and cognitive

states they truly experience. In this way, individuals differ in their capacity to understand others' perspectives depending upon the match between one's projections and the other's real subjective states. This accuracy is rooted in deep psychological structures, including personality.

### **The Imaginative Projection Hypothesis in Psychoanalytic Theory**

Lipps' imaginative projection theory had a profound influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology. Iterations of his theory can be found in multiple contemporary psychological theories. Psychoanalytic theory, in particular, embraced Lipps' imaginative projection theory as the underlying psychological mechanism that drives social relations. Sigmund Freud was one of the first empirical psychologists to wrestle with how empathy functioned, both intrapsychically and between persons. An historical analysis performed by Pigman (1995) demonstrated Freud was heavily influenced by Lipps. Utilizing similar language to Lipps, Freud posited that, "A path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up an attitude at all towards another mental life" (Freud, 1921, p. 110). Freud, like Lipps, proposes that interpersonal relations are really intrapsychic identifications that pave the way to mutual understanding.

Freud proposed that the capacity for empathy emerged only after the development of the ability to differentiate between self and other. This makes intuitive sense; if one cannot differentiate between the subjective self and others, then it would be impossible to project self-states into the object. Rather, in the pre-reflective period, objects may be experienced as part of the self. Only after the capacity for self/object differentiation develops can we then begin to

imagine what others may be thinking and feeling (Ogden, 1993) Also consistent with Lipps, Freud postulated empathic psychological processes, and emotional functioning generally, occur unconsciously (Lipps, 1903; Pigman, 1995).

Contemporary psychoanalytic theories also adopted the imaginative projection hypothesis as an explanation for empathy. Harry Stack Sullivan, for example, described empathy as "... the peculiar emotional linkage that subtends the relationship of the infant with other significant people-the mother or the nurse" (Sullivan, 2012). Under this formulation, empathy is the affective connection that allows the infant to relate to early attachment figures. Sullivan emphasizes the evolutionary function of this relational tool for infants to garner nutrition and to negotiate a harsh and dangerous world.

From a Kleinian perspective, babies initially inhabit a pre-linguistic mode of experiencing without clear boundaries between the self and objects. As infants begin to experience necessary environmental frustrations, they begin formulating a theory of self and other that allows for projection of feeling states (Ogden, 1993). Assuming healthy psychological development with an attuned caregiver, infants eventually acquire the capacity to conceptualize objects with greater complexity. The emphasis of both Harry Stack Sullivan and the neo-Kleinians on the developmental relationship suggests that early experiences with caregivers, whether good or bad, lay the groundwork for our ability to understand others' mental lives.

Heinz Kohut, founder of Self- Psychology, presented a similar intrapsychic theoretical formulation by framing empathy as a form of "vicarious introspection" (Kohut, 1959). Kohut

provides an example of how empathy operates in the following hypothetical scenario in which a therapist must understand the inner states of a uniquely tall patient:

Only when we think ourselves into his place, only when we, by vicarious introspection begin to feel his unusual size as if it were our own and thus revive inner experience in which we had been unusual or conspicuous, only then begins there for us an appreciation of the meaning that the unusual size may have for this person and only then have we observed a psychological fact. (p.461, Kohut, 1959)

Just as in the imaginative projection theory, Kohut suggests we use our own feelings to access the imagined feeling states of others. In his last seminar, Kohut postulated a deeper form of empathic attunement: "...the move from understanding to explaining... and the next step of giving of interpretations is a move from a lower form of empathy to a higher form of empathy" (p. 129, Kohut, 1981). Kohut maintained that even while accurately understanding the experience of another is an empathic response, we can achieve a deeper empathic stance by understanding the psychological structures that underlie the imagined feeling state. In this framework, the therapist's empathically mediated interpretations help the patient understand their intrapsychic life and its impact on conscious feeling states. Under a Kohutian lens, the effectiveness of the therapy depends upon the quality of the therapist's empathic attunement and ability to communicate this understanding in a manner the patient will be able to hear.

The importance of empathic processes for understanding others is not unique to the consulting room, of course. Research demonstrates that individuals with higher "social

intelligence,” theoretically synonymous with capacity for empathic perspective-taking, have more intimate and fulfilling social relationships, higher marital satisfaction, and surround themselves with highly empathic others (Schutte et al., 2001). Given that the ability to accurately take the perspective of others is vital to social functioning, it is important to understand what factors impede and promote the development of this capacity. Variability in adult empathic perspective-taking ability suggests there are biological and developmental factors that shape these abilities during childhood and continue to affect them into adulthood.

### **Early Attachment and Empathic Perspective-taking in Adults**

The quality of attachment relationships early in life has a profound impact on the ability to take on the perspective of others in adulthood. Peter Fonagy, a psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, has devoted his career to integrating psychoanalytic conceptualizations of empathic perspective-taking (which he terms “mentalization”) and empirical work on the developmental impact of attachment relationships. Furthermore, his laboratory has developed a treatment for patients who lack the ability to think accurately about others’ mental states called Mentalization Based Treatment (MBT; Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). Briefly reviewing the theoretical constructs that ground MBT will help in understanding the findings of attachment literature.

Rather than using existing terminologies, the authors of MBT introduced two new terms that function as empirical operationalizations of empathy: mentalization and reflective function (RF). Mentalization is defined as “The capacity to perceive and understand oneself and others in terms of mental states (feelings, beliefs, intentions and desires) ... (and the) capacity to reason about

one's own and others' behavior in terms of mental states, i.e., reflection" (p. 6, Fonagy, 1998). Underlying the capacity for mentalization is a capacity for Reflective Functioning (RF): RF involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component that ideally provides the individual with a well-developed capacity to distinguish inner from outer reality, pretend from 'real' modes of functioning, intra-personal mental and emotional processes from interpersonal communications" (pg. 4, Fonagy, 1998). While these terms are similar to prior psychoanalytic conceptualizations of empathy, RF emphasizes the role of self-awareness in discriminating between one's own intrapsychic idiosyncrasies and the feeling states of the other.

The authors of the MBT postulate that the capacity for empathic perspective-taking derives from the quality of attachment relationships during infancy and childhood. Attachment patterns were first conceptualized by Mary Ainsworth in her "Strange Situation" experiment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In the experiment, children are left in a playroom by their primary caregiver. After, a different adult enters the room and tries to interact with the child. The stranger then leaves and the child is reacquainted with their primary caretaker. Securely attached children welcomed their caretaker's return after separation and allowed themselves to be comforted despite the stress of the situation. Anxiously attached children often displayed ambivalence upon the return of a caregiver and did not let themselves be comforted. Children with avoidant attachment generally did not respond to the caregivers return and, like anxiously attached children, did not use the attachment relationship as a source of comfort (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

According to MBT, a secure attachment leads to healthy psychological development, while anxious or avoidant attachment styles often result in a diminished capacity for mentalization later in life. These findings have been corroborated both inside and outside the MBT research laboratory (Meins et al., 1998; Villichan-Lyra et al., 2015; Rosso et al., 2016). In one of these studies, attachment security was measured during infancy. Different psychological measures were used to assess mentalization as the children grew older. Children with secure attachments had great capacity for symbolic play at age three and better mentalizing abilities at age five than children with insecure and avoidant attachments to caregivers (Meins et al., 1998). These results were found regardless of differences in cognitive capacity of the children.

In another study, Rosso et al. (2016) investigated whether attachment style and reflective function of primary caregivers predicted their children's capacity for mentalization. They assessed the attachment styles of mothers with the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al. 1985) and RF through the Reflective Functioning Scale (RFS; Fonagy et al. 1998). They found that mothers with secure attachments scored significantly higher on reflective functioning indices than mothers with a generally insecure attachment style. They also found that mothers with higher reflective function scores had more securely attached children, who in turn had demonstrated greater mastery over emotional, cognitive, and psychological language as they developed. Lastly, securely attached children also had higher scores on mentalization indices as they grew older. (Rosso et al., 2016)

In another study, Fonagy et al. (1991) demonstrated that the attachment style of prospective parents was a predictor of their one-year old's attachment style at 20 months follow-up. The relationship between caregiver mentalization abilities and the security of the attachment relationships also holds true in the face of trauma. In a study among mothers who had suffered trauma, only those who had high mentalization abilities had securely attached children, while those mothers with low mentalization abilities tended to have insecurely attached children (Fonagy et al.,1995). These studies demonstrate that having an attuned caregiver that provides a language for cognitive, emotional, and psychological life paves the way for children's capacity to mentalize later in life. A secure attachment appears to be a necessary precursor to the development of mentalization and related psychological capacities.

### **Empathic Perspective-taking, Insecure Attachment and Personality Disorders**

The authors of MBT propose that the inability to take the perspective of others lies at the heart of certain types of psychopathology, particularly personality disorders (Fonagy & Bateman, 2006). Research demonstrates that individuals with personality disorders often had insecure attachment relationships as children. Diana Diamond and colleagues (2014) conducted the Adult Attachment Interview (George et al. 1985) with a population of patients with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and comorbid BPD/Narcissistic Personality Disorder to discern their predominant attachment style. The AAI includes three categories of secure/autonomous, dismissing/ devaluing and preoccupied attachment styles. They also include "cannot classify" and "unresolved" designators for individuals who demonstrate vacillating attachment styles



throughout the interview. Within this five-way classification system (Main & Goldwyn, 1998), “dismissive” attachment is synonymous with the “insecure-avoidant” attachment of Ainsworth’s work (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), while “preoccupied” attachment maps onto the “insecure-anxious” attachment style (Daniel, 2006). Diamond et al. (2014) found that 65% of patients with BPD had a preoccupied attachment style (29.5% dismissive), whereas 54.5% of patients with comorbid BPD/NPD had a dismissive attachment style (36.4% preoccupied). Furthermore, they found these patients scored significantly below average on RF indices, revealing difficulties with differentiating between their own and other’s mental lives

These findings corroborate earlier findings that suggested insecure attachment underlies the self-regulatory and interpersonal instabilities that characterize personality disorders (Fonagy et al. 2002). The insecure attachment produced by inadequate mirroring by caretakers inhibits the development of a functionally autonomous self, which results not only in a diminished capacity for affect regulation (Fonagy & Target, 2003), but also diffuse boundaries between internal/external worlds and self/other (Fonagy and Target, 2000). These difficulties have profound implications for the ability to take the perspective of others, and research has demonstrated this tendency time and again (for Antisocial Personality Disorder, Dolan & Fullam, 2004; for Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Ritter, 2011).

In *Severe Personality Disorders*, Otto Kernberg (1984) posited that personality operates on a continuum of functional levels. He deems these the neurotic, borderline, and psychotic levels of personality organization, and argued that they differ in three important respects: i) the degree of

identity integration, ii) the types and severity of defense mechanisms employed, iii) and differences in accuracy of reality testing. Individuals with a neurotic organization tend to be well adjusted, are capable of integrated identities, rely on mature defense mechanisms, and have intact reality testing capabilities. Individuals on a borderline level of personality organization rely on primitive defense mechanisms and experience identity diffusion, though they retain reality testing capabilities. Individuals organized on the psychotic level lack identity diffusion, rely on primitive defense mechanisms and lack reality testing capabilities.

Kernberg (1984) proposes the experience of identity diffusion is caused by the struggle to maintain complex representations of self and others:

In contrast to neurotic structures, where all self-images (both “good” and “bad”) have been integrated into a comprehensive self, and where “good” and “bad” images of others can be integrated into a comprehensive concept of others, in borderline personality organization such integration fails, and both self and object representations remain multiple, contradictory, affective- cognitive representations of self and others (p.12).

This is consistent with Fonagy’s conception of Reflective Functioning (Fonagy, 1998). If an individual lacks the capacity for complex representations of their internal states, then it will also be impossible to represent others’ mental lives with complexity.

Since the attachment relationship lays the groundwork for interpersonal functioning throughout the lifespan, it may be tempting to assume empathic perspective-taking ability undergoes little change after an individual reaches adulthood. Recent research suggests the

contrary, however, indicating our ability to understand other's mental lives may improve under certain circumstances.

### **The Study of Interest and Replication Efforts**

A recent and frequently cited study by Kidd & Castano (2013) investigated the impact that reading literary fiction had on adults' capacities to understand the mental lives of others. The article reported the results of five separate experiments, each of which compared the performance on empathy tests for those who read literary fiction to those who had not. In the first experiment, (N=86) participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Participants either read a passage of literary fiction or nonfiction before completing two empathy measures: the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2001) and a false belief task (Converse et al., 2008.) The RMET requires participants to view photographs of 36 pairs of eyes and correctly identify the emotion being expressed in them (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2001). In the false belief task, (Converse et al., 2008), participants are presented with an interpersonal scenario and required to discern that the two persons have separate perspectives. Results indicated that individuals who had been placed in the literary fiction condition performed significantly better on the RMET than the nonfiction condition ( $M=25.90$ ,  $SD=4.38$  vs  $M= 23.47$ ,  $SD= 5.17$ ;  $F_{1,82}= 6.4$ ,  $P=.01$ ). The effect size was moderate (Cohen's  $d=.56$ ). This main effect was not found on the false belief task ( $F_{1,63}=1.47$ ,  $P=.22$ ) demonstrating no difference in cognitive Theory of Mind between the two groups.

In Experiment 2, (N=114) the authors compared performance among three different conditions: literary fiction, popular fiction and no reading. The authors utilized a different affective Theory of Mind measure, the Diagnostic Manual of Nonverbal Accuracy 2- Adult Faces Test (DANVA-2AF; Nowicki, 2010). Individuals in the literary fiction condition were found to commit fewer errors (M=4.7, SD= 2.31) than individuals in the popular fiction (5.8, SD=2.93) and no reading (M=5.86, SD= 2.89) conditions, although to a lesser, “marginally significant” degree ( $F_{2,108}=2.57$ ,  $P=.08$ ). There were no differences in performance between the popular fiction and no reading conditions on the DANVA-2AF ( $P=.98$ ). As in experiment 1, no significant differences were found in performance on the false belief task (P values > 0.13).

Experiment 3 (N=69) aimed to replicate the finding that literary fiction improved empathic perspective-taking while popular fiction did not, and so participants were randomly assigned to these conditions. As in experiment 2, the literary fiction group (M= 25.92, SD=4.07) performed better than the popular fiction group (M=23.22, SD=6.16) on the RMET ( $F_{1,65}=4.07$ ,  $P=.04$ ). In Experiment 4, (N=72) the authors replaced the false belief task with a more complex cognitive measure, the Yoni Test (Shamay-Tsoory & Aharon-Peretz, 2007). Results replicated the main effect of prior experiments: the literary fiction (M=26.19, SD= 5.43) condition performed better than the popular fiction group (M= 23.71, SD= 5.08) on the RMET ( $F_{1,68}=4.39$ ,  $P=.04$ ). Furthermore, participants in the literary fiction condition performed better on the Yoni Test than those in the popular fiction condition ( $F_{1,67}=4.47$ ,  $P=.03$ ).

In the 5<sup>th</sup> (N=356) and last experiment, the authors replicated previous findings with a larger sample, which allowed them to control demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, and level of education. In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to either a literary fiction, popular fiction, or no reading condition before completing the RMET and Yoni Test. The main effect for RMET performance was replicated: individuals in the literary fiction condition (M= 26.21, SD=3.59) performed better than the individuals in the popular fiction (M= 24.96, SD= 4.6) and no reading (M=25.2, SD= 4.69) conditions ( $F_{2,352}=3.1$ ,  $P=.04$ ). This main effect was not replicated for the Yoni Task, however ( $F_{2,351}=2.88$ ,  $P=.052$ ).

This main effect has been replicated in two other laboratories since the initial publication (Black & Barnes, 2015; Panero et al., 2016). Black & Barnes (2015) utilized a within-subjects design, randomly assigning participants into one of two possible parallel procedures. In one condition, participants read a passage of non-fiction before completing the RMET, then after a break read literary fiction and completed the RMET again. The other half of the participants were placed in the opposite sequence, reading literary fiction first than non-fiction after a break. Their results reflected the same main effect found in the Kidd & Castano (2013) study, though with a smaller effect size. They argued this smaller effect size was likely due to practice effects, since most participants had improved performance on the 2<sup>nd</sup> administration of the RMET regardless of condition.

Black & Barnes (2015) extended this line of research by investigating whether watching accomplished TV dramas improved performance on the RMET compared to participants who

watched a documentary. They found that individuals who watched television dramas performed significantly better on the RMET than individuals in the TV documentary group (Black & Barnes, 2015). This study is notable because it suggests there is a shared mechanism in literary fiction and television drama that expands the empathic perspective-taking abilities of readers/viewers.

In another effort at replication, Panero et al. (2016) reported they followed the same methodological procedure as the Kidd & Castano (2013) study with a much larger sample size (N= 782) across four conditions: literary fiction, popular fiction, non-fiction and no reading conditions. Contrary to the prior studies, however, they found no improved performance in the literary fiction group on the RMET. In a commentary response, Kidd & Castano (2017) argued that the Panero et al. (2016) study had significant methodological shortcomings that undermined the veracity of their results, and in particular that they had not checked to see whether the experimental manipulation (reading) was completed by participants.

In the original study, Kidd & Castano (2013) removed the results from participants who took less than 30 seconds to read a page. Panero et al. (2016) claimed to have removed participants who deviated  $\pm 3.5$  SD from the mean reading time, yet Kidd & Castano (2017) found these participants were not actually removed from data analyses. Furthermore, Kidd & Castano (2017) found that participants were not randomly assigned, as different experimental groups had widely discrepant numbers of participants. After excluding participants with significantly deviant reading times, Kidd & Castano (2017) reanalyzed the Panero et al. (2016) data and found that the

literary fiction condition did in fact perform significantly better on the RMET than the other conditions (Kidd & Castano, 2017).

### **The Possible Impact of Personality Organization on the Use of Literary Fiction**

Having demonstrated the main effect across five experiments and finding further validation in two replication efforts, the effect of literary fiction on empathic perspective-taking seems to be robust. Kidd & Castano (2013) suggest that, "... through the systematic use of phonological, grammatical, and semantic stylistic devices, literary fiction defamiliarizes its readers," and that it, "... uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to character's subjective experiences" (p. 378). Notably, however, they do not discuss the difference between priming Theory of Mind capacities temporarily and improving them permanently. They admit the brevity of their intervention likely didn't result in lasting change, stating, "...it is unlikely that people learned much more about others by reading any of the short texts (p.380.)" It seems implied that a more lasting change in perspective-taking would require repeated experiences with defamiliarization rather than the brief intervention of their experiment.

Jeremy Holmes, author of *The Therapeutic Imagination*, similarly argues literature can provide a unique and powerful window into the mind of others, stating that, "... literature can... be seen as a mentalizing *via regia*. In the novel, with the help of the omniscient author, the inner world of the Other is freely accessible to the reader in ways that are impossible in real life" (p. x). These authors suggest literary fiction gives readers direct access to the subjective states of others, an impossibility in real world interpersonal situations. In theory, this privileged access to

others' subjective states expands the reader's appreciation of the other as subject (rather than as object), making it possible to conceptualize of more complex emotions in others. Kidd & Castano (2013) suggest the empathic gains made through reading literary fiction might improve Theory of Mind in real interpersonal interactions. We need to determine, however, whether literary fiction could serve this function for individuals at all levels of personality organization.

I suggest that an individual must have developed certain psychological capabilities to benefit from the mechanism that is being proposed by Kidd & Castano (2013). Literary fiction may function in this way for neurotically organized individuals who have an integrated identity and who aren't likely to project unprocessed primitive affects onto characters in the text. For individuals who can maintain complex representations of their own and others' mental states, the access to a character's subjective state in literary fiction might allow for new psychological experiences that expands the reader's reservoir of emotional experiences.

These psychological capabilities depend in large part on whether the reader has developed a capacity for Reflective Functioning (RF) that allows for the differentiation between their own intrapsychic experiences and those of others. If the reader does not have these capabilities, as is the case with individuals on a borderline or psychotic level of character organization, they may project elements of their own intrapsychic life on both real and fictional scenarios. Indeed, individuals who lack Reflective Functioning capacities can only interpret others' experiences as their own. This inability to see the other as subject significantly limits the extent to which the person can learn from novel interpersonal experiences.



Kidd & Castano (2013) also posit that literary fiction can “pose(s) fewer risks than the real world and... present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing potentially threatening consequences of that engagement” (p. 378). According to Kernberg’s theory (1984), however, individuals with a borderline level of organization experience the eruption of aggressive affect and project it onto neutral objects. While Kidd & Castano (2013) suggest literary fiction provides a uniquely safe space, individuals on a borderline level of organization may interpret hostility in even emotionally neutral fictional accounts. For individuals who operate on a borderline or psychotic level of personality organization, the inability to hold complex representations of self and other undermines the capacity for empathic perspective-taking, both real and imaginary. This should fundamentally limit the ability to use literary fiction to improve empathic perspective-taking.

### **A Priori Hypotheses**

Hypothesis I: I predict that the mean RMET score will be significantly higher in the literary fiction condition compared to the non-fiction condition.

Hypothesis II: I predict that, among individuals high in the PD/ID scale of the IPO-R, there will not be a significant difference in RMET performance between the literary fiction and nonfiction conditions.

Hypothesis III: I predict that the mean score on the total Faux Pas score, and the Intentions, Beliefs, and Empathy subscales of on the Faux Pas Recognition Test will be significantly higher in the literary fiction condition compared to the nonfiction condition.

Hypothesis IV: I predict that, among individuals who are high in the PD/ID scale of the IPO, there will not be a significant difference in performance on the total Faux Pas score and the Intentions, Beliefs, and Empathy subscales of on the Faux Pas Recognition Test between the fiction and nonfiction conditions.

## Chapter II: Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from two sources. Their data was consolidated for analysis. 96 participants were recruited from a large southeastern university through the psychology department's undergraduate research pool. These students selected the present study among several options in the research directory and completed it to earn research credit in their general psychology course. 88 participants were recruited through the Amazon Mechanical Turk marketplace and paid \$5.00 for their participation in the study. In both contexts, participants were provided with a link that directed them to complete the experiment online. The total number of participants (N= 187) satisfied the minimum required to detect the main effect of literary fiction found in the original Kidd and Castano (2013) study (calculated to be N= 49 with a Cohen's  $d=.55$ , Type I error rate ( $\alpha$ ) of 95%, and statistical power, ( $\beta$ ) at .8).

### Procedure

The experiment was programmed on Qualtrics, a software platform which randomly assigned participants to the literary fiction or nonfiction condition, tracked reading time, and conducted complex procedural elements required for administration of the FPRT. Prior to beginning the experiment, participants were provided with an informed consent statement and electronically signed it to continue with the study. Participants then completed the Inventory of Personality Organization- Revised (IPO-R; Smits et al., 2009), which took around 10 minutes to complete. Participants were then randomly assigned to read either a short story of literary fiction

or an essay of non-fiction. Participants then completed the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET; Baron-Cohen & Wheelright, 2001), followed by the Faux Pas Recognition Test (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999). These tasks were the most time consuming, taking around 30 minutes to complete. The entire study averaged around an hour to complete. Please find a description of each measure and their psychometric properties below.

## **Measures**

### *The Inventory of Personality Organization- Revised*

The original Inventory of Personality Organization (IPO; Lenzenweger et al., 2001) grew out of the work of Otto Kernberg (1984) regarding personality organization. It consists of 57 items divided into three subscales: Identity Diffusion, Reality Testing, and the Primitive Defenses scales. The Identity Diffusion scale assesses for affective and behavioral dimensions of identity integration. The Reality Testing scale measures the degree to which one has a clearly delineated and accurate perception of reality. The Primitive Defense items assesses the degree to which individuals utilize defense mechanisms such as splitting, projection, and projective identification. In the original study the three scales were found to be highly correlated (Primitive Defenses & Identity Diffusion = .97, Primitive Defenses & Reality Testing = .71, Identity Diffusion and Reality Testing = .67; Lenzenweger et al., 2001, p.581) Furthermore, all three scales showed internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > .81$ ) and test retest reliability ( $r > .72$ ).

A later revision of the IPO (IPO-R; Smits et al., 2009) found the IPO could effectively be reduced into a two-structure solution where the Identity Diffusion (ID) and Primitive Defense

(PD) subscales were combined. They were also able to decrease the number of items necessary, reducing the number of items from 57 to 41. The ID/PD scale had high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .9$ ) as did the RT scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ .), and the two scales correlate strongly with the original IPO scales, .97 and .92 for the ID/PD and RT scales, respectively (Smits et al., 2009, pg. 226).

### *Reading the Mind in Eyes Test*

The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test- Revised (RMET, Baron-Cohen et al. ,2001) is a performance-based measure consisting of 36 still images of eye regions. Participants must identify which among four emotions best characterizes the affect on display in the image. This measure was originally developed to differentiate individuals with Asperger's syndrome and high functioning autism. These individuals are thought to lack important features of Theory of Mind typical of normative development. The RMET has since become commonly utilized as an "advanced Affective Theory of Mind" measure. Importantly, the iteration utilized in this study is a revised version of the original measure, which consisted of 25 photographs and required participants to choose between only two affects (Baron-Cohen, Jolliffe, Mortimore, & Robertson, 1997). The revised version is a significant improvement upon the original and avoids the ceiling effect that limited its utility. During the development of the revised version, the average score for a general population sample was  $M=26.2$  (Baron-Cohen et al. ,2001, pg. 245).

### *The Faux Pas Recognition Test*

The Faux Pas Recognition Test (Baron-Cohen et al.,1999) was developed to investigate empathic perspective-taking. The measure consists of 20 short stories, 10 of which include instances of a social faux pas. Participants must read the short stories and answer questions about them based on their understanding of the interpersonal interaction depicted in the study. The FPR Test assesses the participant's ability to identify the feelings, beliefs, and intentions of the characters. Thus, it addresses both cognitive and affective dimensions of empathic perspective-taking. Both a child version and an adult version of the Faux Pas Recognition Test were created; the adult version (Stone, Baron-Cohen, & Knight, 1998) was utilized.

### *The Text Passages*

I used the same passages of fiction and nonfiction that Kidd & Castano (2013) used in their first study. Those authors reasoned that, "... in the absence of a clear means of quantifying literariness, the judgements of expert rates (i.e., literary prize jurors) were used... (thus) we selected literary works of fiction by award- winning or canonical writers..." (p. 378) The three literary fiction short stories were "The Runner" by Don DeLillo (2012), "Blind Date" by Lydia Davis (2010) and "A Chameleon" by Anton Chekhov (1979). For the non-fictional essays, "How the Potato Changed the World" by Charles Mann (2011), "Bamboo Steps Up" by Cathie Gandel (2008), and "The Story of the Most Common Bird in the World" by Rob Dunn (2012) were used. Each text is freely available to the public online.

## Chapter III: Results

### Exclusionary Criterion

Some participant data was removed before analysis due to exclusionary criterion. The data of fifteen participants was deleted because they did not finish the experiment. Consistent with the criterion outlined in the Kidd & Castano (2013) study, six participants were removed for taking 3.5 SD above the mean reading time (calculated to be 1461 seconds) or for having an insufficient reading time (less than 200 seconds). Lastly, two participants were removed for achieving significantly low scores on the control questions on the Faux Pas Recognition Test, signifying significant inattention. The total participant pool used in data analysis was  $N=164$ .

### Statistical Analyses

#### *The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET)*

An ANCOVA was performed to assess the impact of reading condition on RMET performance when controlling for personality organization. The main effect of literary condition found in previous studies was not replicated in the present data set (Literary Fiction  $M=26.36$ ,  $SD=3.99$ ; Nonfiction  $M=26.47$ ,  $SD=4.24$ ) [ $F(1,160)=.003$ ,  $p=.957$ ]. An ANCOVA with the Identity Diffusion/ Primitive Defenses as a covariate indicated it had a significant main effect [ $F(1,160)=7.321$ ,  $p=.008$ ], such that greater personality dysfunction (as evinced by higher scores) predicted worse performance on the RMET. See Figure 1 on the following page for a visual representation of the relationship between reading condition, RMET scores, and personality organization. This effect size was small (.044). The interaction between personality organization

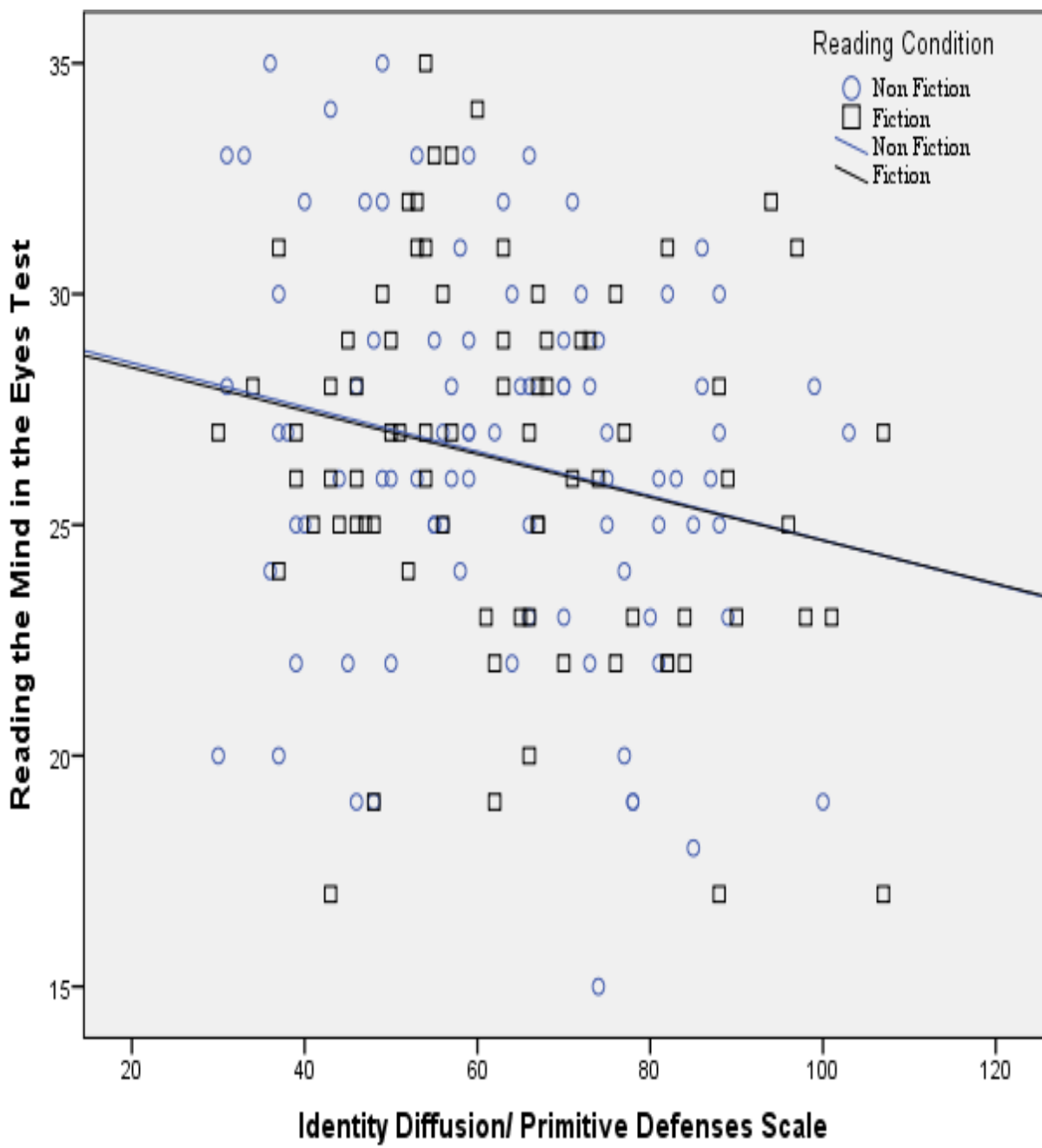


Figure 1: RMET Performance as a Function of ID/PD Scores and Reading Condition



and reading condition was nonsignificant [ $F(1,160)=.001, p=.974$ ].

There was a significant gender effect, such that women ( $N=77, M=27.53, SD=3.69$ ) scored higher on the RMET than men ( $N=89, M=25.48, SD=4.23$ ) [ $F(1,162)=10.722, p=.001$ ]. There was also a significant positive correlation between RMET and age,  $r(162)=.365, p<.001$  and age and the Identity Diffusion/ Primitive Defenses scale,  $r(162)=-.342, p<.001$ , such that older individuals demonstrated lower levels of personality dysfunction. Furthermore, an ANCOVA performed with personality organization and age as covariates revealed that personality organization no longer significantly contributed in explaining RMET score variance [ $F(1,160)=1.44, p=.232$ ], while age remained a significant variable [ $F(1,160)=18.43, p<.001$ ]. A similar pattern emerged with the Reality Testing subscale of the IPO; an ANOVA indicated higher scores predicted worse RMET performance, [ $F(1,163)=1.944, p=.017$ ], but this was no longer significant when age and gender were controlled [ $F(1,160)=3.42, p=.066$ ].

#### *The Faux Pas Recognition Test (FPRT)*

A one-way ANCOVA was performed to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in FPRT scores between the literary fiction and nonfiction conditions when controlling for personality organization. No significant differences were found. The FPRT total score in the literary fiction ( $M=35.42, SD=4.99$ ) and nonfiction ( $M=36.08, SD=3.94$ ) conditions [ $F(1,162)=.905, p=.343$ ]. Please refer to Figure 2 for a graphical representation of reading condition, FPRT score, and personality organization.

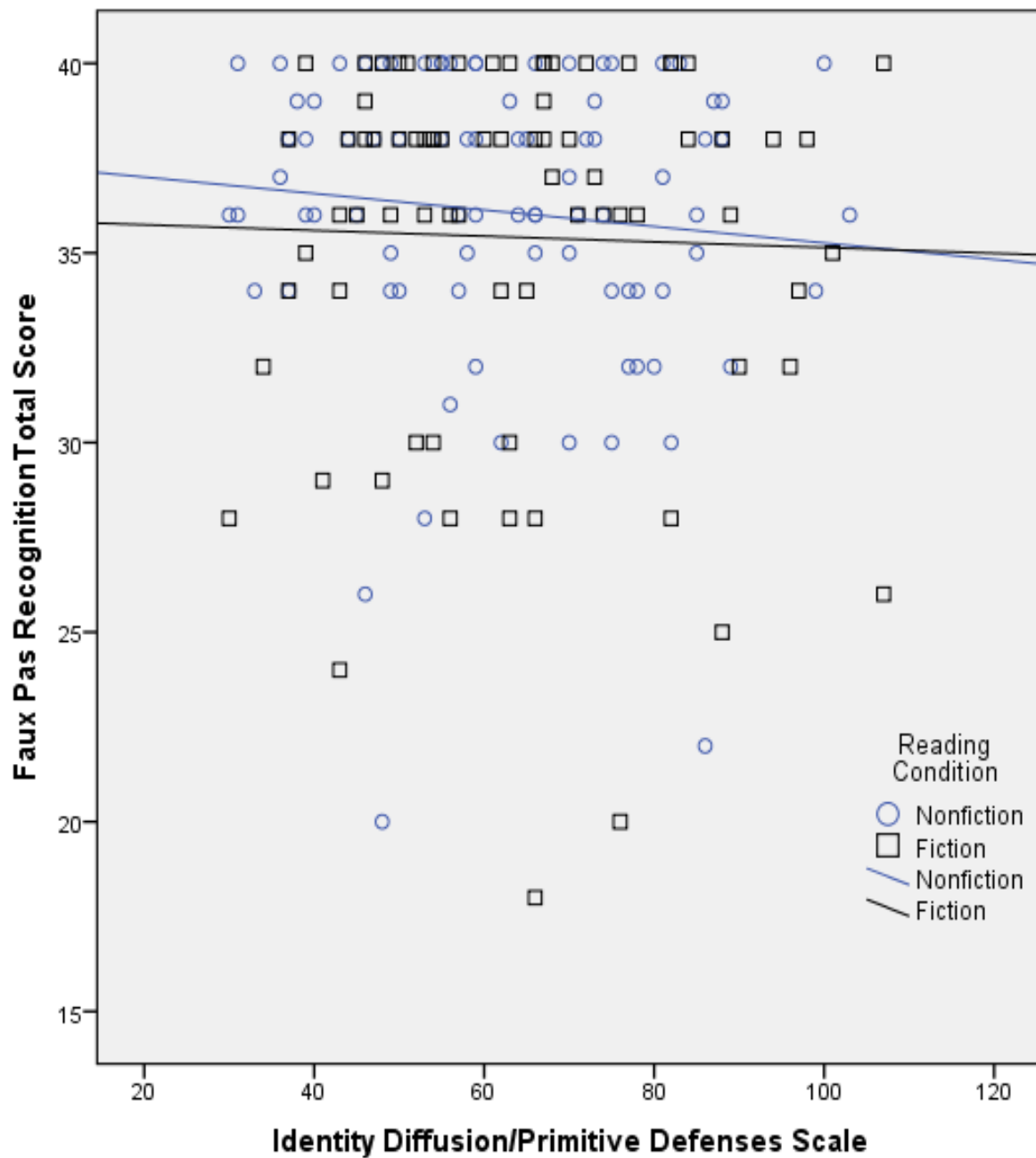


Figure 2: *FPRT Performance as a Function of ID/PD Scores and Reading Condition*

Furthermore, no differences were found on FPRT subscale performance between the literary fiction and nonfiction conditions. Please see Table 1 below for significance values.

Table 1: *One-Way Analysis of Variance of Faux Pas Subscale Scores by Reading Condition*

FP Subscale	Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Faux Pas Recognition Total Score	Between Groups	1	18.057	18.057	0.905	0.343
	Within Groups	162	3233.138	19.958		
Intentions	Between Groups	1	4.314	4.314	0.680	0.411
	Within Groups	162	1028.192	6.347		
Beliefs	Between Groups	1	0.969	0.969	0.173	0.678
	Within Groups	162	905.909	5.592		
Empathy	Between Groups	1	7.141	7.141	1.244	0.266
	Within Groups		929.658	5.739		

ANCOVAs further determined whether personality organization impacted FPRT performance and whether there was an interaction between reading condition and personality organization. Personality organization did not significantly predict performance on any FPRT subscale, nor was there an interaction between personality organization and reading condition on these subscales; see Table 2 on the following page for these values. Men ( $M= 35.73$ ,  $SD= 4.09$ ) and women ( $M= 35.81$ ,  $SD=4.898$ ) did not differ in their aggregate FPRT scores [ $F(1,162)= .014$ ,  $p=.91$ ]. Likewise, age did not significantly predict FPRT total scores,  $r(162)= .15$ ,  $p=.053$ .

*Table 2: Analysis of Covariance of Faux Pas Subscale Scores with Personality Organization and Interaction as Covariates.*

Faux Pas Subscale	Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Faux Pas Recognition Total Score	ID/PD	11.897	11.897	0.591	0.443
	RC * ID/PD	2.698	2.698	0.134	0.715
Intentions Subscale	ID/PD	5.500	5.500	0.860	0.355
	RC*ID/PD	0.057	0.057	0.009	0.925
Beliefs Subscale	IPO_IDPD	6.556	6.556	1.167	0.282
	RC *ID/PD	0.219	0.219	0.039	0.844
Empathy Subscale	ID/PD	0.619	0.619	0.107	0.745
	RC *ID/PD	0.063	0.063	0.011	0.917

\*RC=Reading Condition; ID/PD=Identity Diffusion/ Primitive Defenses Scale of IPO; RC\*ID/PD-Interaction Variable

## Chapter IV: Discussion

### Does Literary Fiction Improve Empathic Perspective-taking?

Replication is frequently encouraged within psychological science but is not done enough. In a recent effort to replicate 100 experiments from three empirical psychology journals published in 2008, only 36 achieved significant results (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). The present study attempted to expand upon the findings of Kidd & Castano (2013), who found that reading literary fiction led to improved performance on a Theory of Mind task. An attempt was made to account for the role personality organization might play in moderating this empathic gain. The main effect for literary fiction was not replicated, as there was no significant difference between the fiction and nonfiction conditions on RMET performance and an additional Theory of Mind measure. These findings are particularly striking since Kidd & Castano (2013) based their conclusions on five independent experiments and this main effect has been successfully replicated twice, albeit once unintentionally (Black & Barnes, 2015; Panero et al., 2016). There were no significant methodological deviations from the original Kidd & Castano (2013) experiment. The sample size was more than satisfactory to detect the main effect were it present.

While the results of the present study suggest reading a brief passage of literary fiction may not improve Theory of Mind, it does not address whether a lifelong pursuit of literary fiction can improve empathic perspective-taking abilities. It is possible a more meaningful intervention might bring about a change in empathic perspective-taking. Multiple prior studies have emphasized a relationship between long-term reading habits and empathic perspective-

taking abilities. The Author Recognition Test (ART; Acheson, Wells & MacDonald, 2008) assesses participant's lifetime exposure to fiction by asking them to differentiate between the names of real and fake authors amongst a list of names. In their original study, Kidd & Castano (2013) found that in four of their five experiments, higher scores on the ART predicted higher RMET performance. This correlation was also found in prior investigations (Mar et al. 2006; Mar & Oakley, 2008), and in a recent study which investigated the relationship between ART, RMET, and alexithymia scores (Samur et al., 2017). These studies suggest individuals familiar with authors of fiction (theorized to represent lifelong exposure to fiction) perform better on empathic perspective-taking tasks.

We still have not determined, however, whether it is exposure to literary fiction that improves empathic perspective-taking, or whether highly empathic people tend to seek out literary fiction. While Kidd & Castano's (2013) study attempted to answer this question, the present findings place this significant question back on the table. Clearly, more and different empirical approaches must investigate the effect reading fiction has on our abilities to understand other's mental states. Perhaps the most effective way to investigate the impact of literary fiction is through a long-term naturalistic design. For instance, a study could be performed by monitoring undergraduates as they entered their academic careers. Researchers would take baseline measures of empathic ability and follow individuals who pursue different academic paths. Changes in empathic perspective-taking abilities could be measured at intervals while also tracking exposure to literary fiction. Such a design would require more time and financial

resources but would investigate the impact of literary fiction over a long period of time and repeated exposure, rather than attempting to capture the subtle and temporary improvements that might result from a brief intervention.

### **Shortcomings of Contemporary Theory of Mind Measures**

Although the RMET has become a gold standard for measuring affective Theory of Mind, the theoretical construct of “Theory of Mind” has limitations that have not hitherto been addressed and that have ramifications for how we study changes in empathic perspective-taking. The construct “Theory of Mind” was first introduced by Premack and Woodruff in their study of chimpanzee social intelligence:

In saying that an individual has a theory of mind, we mean that the individual imputes mental states to himself and to others (either to conspecifics or to other species as well). A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first, because such states are not directly observable, and second, because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms. (p.515, Premack & Woodruff, 1978)

Thus, Theory of Mind is the metarepresentational capacity to have a “mind about minds.” It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for perceiving another's mental life with accuracy and complexity. In the eyes of its originators, one either develops a Theory of Mind or one does not. A categorical inability to take the perspective of others is caused by a lack of Theory of Mind, or “Mindblindness,” a condition that characterizes highly autistic individuals (Baron-

Cohen, 1997). The RMET and FPDT were originally developed to detect significant differences in scores, not the small variances we might expect across a typical adult population.

The RMET frequently creates enough variance among participants to allow for statistically significant results, but researchers often frequently overstate the RMET as a measure of comprehensive Theory of Mind. The RMET alone does not fully capture the multidimensional nature of empathy suggested in contemporary research. It is an affective Theory of Mind measure, designed to investigate whether participants have the capacity to identify others' feeling states. To investigate whether literary fiction improves general empathic perspective-taking abilities, researchers must also include measures that critically assess the participants ability to understand others' thoughts and intentions in addition to their feeling states.

In the present study, the Faux Pas Detection Test was included due to its multidimensional operationalization of empathy. It is intended to test participant's understanding of character's thoughts and intentions as well as their feeling states. Unfortunately, it did not produce significant variance among participants' scores. There was a ceiling effect such that most of the participants, regardless of reading condition and personality organization, performed very well on the measure. The scoring instructions for the subscales seemed overly permissive of a broad scope of responses (i.e., any response that referred to the Faux Pas in any capacity, or expressed any negative emotional response, was counted as correct). This tendency to count



most responses as correct, despite significant differences in the complexity of responses, seems to limit its usefulness in detecting minor differences in empathic perspective-taking.

Clearly, more nuanced measurements of empathic perspective-taking need to be developed to investigate differences among a population of highly functioning adults. The Adult Attachment Interview (George et al. 1985), for instance, would provide a nuanced understanding of the individual's relational functioning and mentalization abilities, but performing this interview with large samples sizes would be untenable save for the well-funded research teams. There is a serious need for the development of empathic perspective-taking measures that can be used conveniently but which also pull for significant variability in a non-autistic adult population. Such a measure would operationalize empathic perspective taking as a multidimensional construct by assessing for the ability to discriminate other's feelings, thoughts, and intentions with accuracy.

### **Personality Organization and Empathic Perspective-taking**

The present study differs from prior studies in its use of a self-report measure of personality *organization* rather than by comparing a clinical group of personality disordered individuals to a control group. It is important to reiterate that the effect of personality organization became non-significant once age was factored in as covariate. Older individuals reported less personality dysfunction than younger ones, thus participant's age and level of personality organization were highly related and shared variance in RMET scores. Furthermore, age had more predictive validity in estimating RMET performance than IPO-R scores. From a

practical perspective, then, asking someone's age would provide more predictive power for RMET performance than by administering the IPO-R (and it would be far more convenient, too).

Individuals with lower levels of personality organization (who were also younger) performed significantly worse on the RMET than older, more highly organized participants. This finding is consistent with the theoretical literature that suggests empathic difficulties underlie personality psychopathology. The empirical literature remains unclear, however, about whether individuals with personality disorders perform better or worse than healthy controls on Theory of Mind tasks. In a study comparing performance on the Pictures of Facial Affect Measure (developed by Ekman & Friesen, 1984), Bland et al. (2004) found that individuals with BPD performed significantly worse on identifying facial expressions than healthy controls. Samur et al. (2017) found that individuals who struggle with emotional identification and expression (alexithymia) perform worse on the RMET. Preißler et al. (2010) compared the performance of a group of women with BPD to healthy controls on the RMET and the "Movie for Assessment of Social Cognition" (MASC; Dziobek et al, 2006). They found no differences between the groups on RMET performance, but found the BPD group exhibited significant deficits in correctly identifying the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of characters in the MASC.

Fertuck et al. (2009), on the other hand, found that individuals with BPD performed *better* than healthy controls on the RMET, particularly on the "neutral" faces and on the overall RMET score. They argue individuals with BPD have an enhanced sensitivity to other's facial expressions that promotes better performance on the RMET, but also underlies their

interpersonal difficulties. Frick et al. (2012) found BPD patients better recognized both positive and negative faces on the RMET. Muddying the waters further, Arnoud et al. (2010) found individuals with BPD performed similarly to healthy controls on a different Theory of Mind task, developed by Happé (1994).

These contradictory findings do not supply us with an easy answer. Researchers will continue to address whether individuals with personality disorders are impaired in their Theory of Mind capacities, and if so, in what way. It is worth mentioning that the divergent findings may be artifacts of operationalizing empathic perspective-taking in substantially different ways (mentalization, social cognition, Theory of Mind) and assuming different Theory of Mind measures are capturing the same theoretical construct. The research literature would benefit from replicating these studies and making sense of their seemingly disparate findings. New studies utilizing different measures and populations might further complicate the situation.

The IPO-R is a recent revision and remains relatively untested outside of the clinical domain (Smits et al., 2009). It is possible that the application of the IPO-R to a non-clinical population of undergraduates and Amazon Mechanical Turk workers did not result in a wide enough distribution of scores to represent both neurotic and borderline levels of characterological organization. Since the authors of the IPO-R do not provide distinct cut-offs for the different levels of organization, one must compare “low” to “high” scorers on its scales. The descriptive statistics of the present study’s population [ $M= 63$   $SD= 18.1$ ], were similar to the non-clinical population of the IPO-R study [ $M= 64.44$   $SD= 14.84$ ] (Smits et al., 2009, p. 226). This begs the

question of whether there were enough individuals exhibiting a borderline character structure [clinical patients,  $M=76$ ,  $SD=18$ ] (Smits et al., 2009, p. 226) in the present study for adequate comparison. In future research, administering the IPO-R to both a personality disordered population and non-clinical population, then measuring performance on the RMET, would allow for a categorical comparison of RMET scores across these levels of personality organization.

### **Limitations**

A limitation that plagues online experiments is that one cannot guarantee participants demonstrated attention and effort during the intervention (reading the passage) and during self-report questionnaires. Efforts were made to reinforce concentration by requiring participants to read for at least 200 seconds before they could continue to the next task. Furthermore, participants were forewarned that a control question about the passage would be asked at the end of the experiment. All participants answered the control question correctly, exhibiting at least minimal attention while reading the passage.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

There were no conflicts of interest that may have affected the administration of the experiment or the interpretation of its results.

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## Appendices



**Appendix I: Sample Items from the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test**  
(Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2001)

**Practice Item**

jealous

panicked



arrogant

hateful

1)

playful

comforting



irritated

bored

2)

terrified

upset



arrogant

annoyed

**Appendix II: Sample Stories from the Faux Pas Detection Test**  
(Baron Cohen et al., 1995)

*Sample Control Story*

Story 1. Vicky was at a party at her friend Oliver's house. She was talking to Oliver when another woman came up to them. She was one of Oliver's neighbors. The woman said, "Hello," then turned to Vicky and said, "I don't think we've met. I'm Maria, what's your name?"

"I'm Vicky."

"Would anyone like something to drink?" Oliver asked.

1. Did anyone say something they shouldn't have said or something awkward?

**If yes, ask:**

2. Who said something they shouldn't have said or something awkward?

3. Why shouldn't he/she have said it or why was it awkward?

4. Why do you think he/she said it?

5. Did Vicky and Maria know each other?

6. How do you think Vicky felt?

**Control questions:** 7. In the story, where was Vicky?

8. Who was hosting the party?

*Sample Faux Pas Story*

Story 2. Helen's husband was throwing a surprise party for her birthday. He invited Sarah, a friend of Helen's, and said, "Don't tell anyone, especially Helen." The day before the party, Helen was over at Sarah's and Sarah spilled some coffee on a new dress that was hanging over her chair. "Oh!" said Sarah, "I was going to wear this to your party!" "What party?" said Helen.

"Come on," said Sarah, "Let's go see if we can get the stain out."

Did anyone say something they shouldn't have said or something awkward?

**If yes, ask:**

Who said something they shouldn't have said or something awkward?

1. Why shouldn't he/she have said it or why was it awkward?
  
2. Why do you think he/she said it?
  
3. Did Sarah remember that the party was a surprise party?
  
4. How do you think Helen felt?

**Control question:** 7. In the story, who was the surprise party for?

8. What got spilled on the dress?

### **Vita**

Morgun Custer was born in Des Moines, Iowa to Jeffrey Custer and Angela Custer (Scharfenberg). He has five siblings: Konrad, Hunter, Emily, Kell, and Annaliese. He moved to Franklin, Tennessee as a child and grew up there. He graduated from Fred J. Page High School located in Rudderville, Tennessee. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in May of 2013 with a double major in Honors Philosophy and Psychology with a minor in English. In August of 2013 he was accepted into the Clinical Psychology doctoral program at the University of Tennessee under the mentorship of Michael R. Nash, Ph.D. He achieved a Master of Arts degree in May of 2017 investigating the relationship between empathy and hypnotizability. Michael R. Nash retired in 2017 and Morgun now works under the direction of Timothy Hulsey, Ph.D. Next year, Morgun will be working at the Albany Medical Center in Albany, NY, as a Clinical Psychology intern. After graduation, Morgun plans to practice psychotherapy with adult patients and participate in student education and supervision. Morgun has an amazing and supportive wife, Jordyn Bidwell, and a basset hound, Banjo, who will join him in celebrating the completion of degree.