

## **Fiction Reading and Empathy Capacity of Selected Filipino Adolescents and Young Adults**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to discover if adolescents' and young adults' empathy capacity is higher when they engage more in fiction reading. A total of 301 students, aged 16-22, completed a self-administered questionnaire. More than half (56%) of the respondents consider reading as a hobby with books as the preferred reading material. Around 38% have moderate fiction reading scores and around 77% have high empathy capacity scores. Findings showed that the older the respondent is, the less likely they would read fiction and the lower their empathy level. Females are more likely to read fiction and are more empathic than males. Also, results revealed that the more the individual reads fiction, the more empathic they can become. Home and school interventions can be created to increase opportunities and desire for reading fiction and enhancing empathy capacity.

*Keywords:* adolescents, empathy, fiction reading, young adults

## Empathy in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Adolescence occurs approximately from 10-22 years old (Steinberg, 2016) and is the life phase that continues until adulthood. Changes in this stage result in bigger physiques and sexual development, and other advances in the cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Berk, 2014). Prosocial behaviors such as empathy also advance in development over the course of this life stage. Adolescents would start to demonstrate prosocial behaviors that do not only benefit them but also promote true acts of empathy which benefit others (Steinberg, 2016). Empathy is one's capacity to understand the feelings of others and share their emotions or to feel with someone (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Further, it is presented as a "multidimensional construct" and "behavioral competency" which includes cognitive (i.e. perception and understanding) and affective (i.e. feelings) components (Derntl et al., 2010). It is crucial to group communication, participation in social life, formation of meaningful bonds, internalization of rules, and motivator for helping behaviors (Levy et al., 2019; Klimecki, 2019; McDonald & Messinger, 2013).

Schickedanz et al. (2001) said that empathy can be developed as early as eighteen months old. At this age, the infant does not understand the psychological condition of the person s/he is empathizing with but is empathically stimulated. As the child grows older, s/he would start to recognize other's psychological states through personal experiences and insights on what another may be feeling. Empathy continues to develop into the adolescent years (Berk, 2014; Mc Donald & Messinger, 2013). The empathy development of 14–16-year-olds is higher compared to their younger counterparts (Allemand et al., 2015). Similarly, Brouns et al. (2013) found that empathy increases as age increases based on their study of 16–19-year-olds. Gruhn et al. (2008) found that the empathy self-reports of 15–24-year-olds were higher than older adults.

In terms of sex, females were found to be more empathic than males (Allemand et al., 2015; Brouns et al., 2013) or have higher ratings of empathy in self-report surveys (Derntl et al., 2010). On the other hand, Gruhn et al. (2008) found no sex differences on empathy self-reports.

Meditation-based techniques, such as mindfulness meditation and loving kindness training, have arisen to enhance social emotions like compassion and empathy (Singer & Klimecki, 2014; Klimecki, 2019). Aside from these, other researchers (Mention some of these researchers) have also seen the potential of reading fiction to enhance these social emotions. Rowe (2018) suggests that specific fiction titles in library collections and guided discussions can help increase empathy through the processes of identification and transportation/emotional immersion.

### Fiction Reading and Empathy

Reading fiction means understanding written or printed stories that are the expression of the author's imagination (Kurland, 2000). People read fiction to gain new information, be entertained, and experience the feelings and ideas part of the story. Recreational reading, though not always through fiction, can increase literature understanding, improve grammar and spelling (Gallick, 1999 as cited in Schickedanz et al., 2001). Adolescents increase their ability of recalling and analyzing literature as they increase in age (Schickedanz et al., 2001), however, males were found to be average or poor readers, read fewer classical stories willingly, and spend less time reading (European Commission, 2008 as cited in Uusen & Mürsepp, 2012). Oatley (2016), in his review of the effects of fiction, concluded that reading fiction improves empathy. This happens through an engagement in understanding another's mind and

experiences such as the fictional characters' (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). The reader places himself in another's situation to explore people's lives and events which have happened and may happen (Altmann et al., 2014). Kidd and Castano (2013) found from their study that fiction readers had higher empathy scores than those who read non-fiction or popular fiction. They explained that with literary fiction, the character's interior lives are portrayed, and the readers explore the character's emotions and motivations. Similarly, Mar (2014) found that fiction reading enhances social abilities and that greater immersion in a story predicted higher empathy levels.

This study aims to determine whether the empathy level of adolescents who read more fiction is higher compared to those who do not. Stansfield and Bunce (2014) found that reading fiction specifically enhances cognitive empathy or the ability to understand another person's perspective. Reading fiction activities may be an avenue for intervention in increasing empathy capacity. Further, past studies were done on young adults in developed countries. No study was found to have been done on adolescents and young adults in the Philippine setting. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Do demographic factors (age, sex) predict the levels of fiction reading and empathy among adolescents and young adults?
2. What is the impact of fiction reading on adolescent and young adults' empathy capacity?

Findings of this study may be significant to society since empathy is beneficial for relationships with different individuals across various settings (Klimecki, 2019). Enhancing empathy in adolescents is important for social competence and reading fiction could be an opportunity to do that at this stage. The results may also encourage academic institutions, media, or even family units to promote reading fiction materials early in life to increase empathy for the well-being of individuals.

### **Methodology**

This is a mixed-methods study using the cross-sectional design. All the data was gathered at one point in time. The final sample size of 301 consisted of 114 male students and 187 female students. The respondents were selected from 418 students from three general education courses who come from various degree programs of the university. They were selected through proportional stratified random sampling by separating the population [male=158 and female=260] by sex or into two strata for equal representation. With a sampling fraction of 72/100, using a 95% confidence interval and a margin of error of 3, the final sample size was computed. A draw-lots method was conducted to randomly choose the respondents from the list. The age range within this sample is 16-22 years old.

A questionnaire with four parts was used. The first part gathered socio-demographic characteristics [i.e. age, sex]. The second part is the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) of Jolliffe and Farrington (2006). It has 20 items with a 9-point scoring system (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), using -4 [exceedingly unlike me] to +4 [exceedingly like me]. Negative items are reversely scored, and items are summed up to obtain a scales core. Positive 80 points is the highest possible score while -80 points is the lowest. The higher the score, the higher the empathy level. The third part is the Fiction Reading Scale (FRS) with 16 items centered on the amount of fiction read, time spent reading, interest, and emotional transportation derived from Stansfield and Bunce (2014) with question ideas from Fitzgerald (2014). It also used the 9-

point scoring system (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) with possible scores of -64 to +64. The higher the score, the higher the level of reading fiction. The fourth part is the population characteristic survey based on one's preference of reading as a hobby, their preference of fiction or non-fiction material, and the medium used in reading such as actual books or Kindle. The questionnaire was pretested to college students. The outcome of the Cronbach's Alpha was  $\alpha=0.766$  for BES and  $\alpha=0.870$  for FRS, which indicates a good degree of consistency. For face validity, the content of the questionnaire was examined by three experts, two on adolescent development and one on literature.

The permission of the lecturers and the informed consent of the respondents were requested. Upon approval, the respondents accomplished the questionnaire after class hours in the lecture halls or were brought back during the next class. After this survey, four high scorers and four low scorers underwent an in-depth interview to further describe reading fiction's effect on their empathy experiences.

Descriptive measures were used to present age, sex, reading preferences, and the scale scores. Normality testing proved that the data is not approximately normally distributed. Thus, nonparametric tests were used. The impact of age on reading fiction and empathy level was analyzed using Kendall's Rank Correlation while Mann-Whitney U test was used to investigate the impact of sex on reading fiction and empathy level. For both age and sex, Nonparametric Linear Regression was used. Both Kendall's Rank Correlation Analysis and Nonparametric Linear Regression were used to determine the relationship of reading fiction and empathy. Qualitative analysis of data from the in-depth interview was done to see the underlying themes of the adolescents' responses.

## Results

### Age & Sex of Respondents

Table 1 shows the age and sex distribution of the respondents. Nearly a third were 18 years old and more than half were females.

**Table 1**

*Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Age and Sex of the Respondents (n=301)*

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
16	4	1.30%
17	71	23.60%
18	93	<b>30.90%</b>
19	76	25.30%
20	41	13.60%
21	12	4.00%
22	4	1.30%
Sex		
Female	187	<b>62.10%</b>
Male	114	37.90%

### Reading Fiction (RF) Level of Respondents

More than a third of the respondents belong to the moderate level (Table 2). The average reading fiction score was -6.113 (SD= 35.073) which belongs to this level.

**Table 2**

*Fiction Reading Level of the Respondents (n=301)*

Levels	Frequency	Percentage
High (23 to 64)	77	25.60%
Moderate (-22 to 22)	114	<b>37.90%</b>
Low (-64 to -23)	110	36.50%

When those who indicated that reading is a hobby were asked about their reading preferences, 45% stated that they preferred fiction, 44% preferred both fiction and non-fiction, and 11% preferred non-fiction.

The most preferred medium in reading is actual books followed by the android phone (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Preferred Medium of Reading of Respondents*

Medium	Frequency	Percentage
Actual books	248	<b>82.40%</b>
Android phone	101	33.60%
Android tablet	49	14.60%
Kindle	15	5.00%
Laptop/personal computer	7	2.30%
Printed copies (pdf, handouts)	1	0.30%

\*multiple responses

### Empathy Level of the Respondents

More than three-fourths of the respondents had a high empathy level (Table 4). The average empathy score is 45.635 (SD= 25.895) which belongs to the high level.

**Table 4**

*Empathy Level of the Respondents (n=301)*

Levels	Frequency	Percentage
High (27 to 80)	231	<b>76.70%</b>
Moderate (-28 to 26)	69	22.90%
Low (-80 to -27)	1	0.30%

### **Effect of Age on Reading Fiction of Respondents**

The rank correlation of age and reading fiction level resulted as tau  $b = -0.116665$  which shows a very weak negative relationship. However, their relationship is significant at  $\alpha = 0.0081 < 0.0500$ . As age increases, reading fiction decreases.

The non-parametric regression analysis showed that, with a 95% level of confidence, the real value of the slope of the linear regression line for age and reading fiction near -8 to -4. The formula here can be estimated as  $y = 78.4 + (-4.8)x$ . Thus, age affects reading fiction.

### **Effect of Age on Empathy Level of Respondents**

The rank correlation of age and empathy level shows a very weak relationship with tau  $b = -0.093595$ . Their relationship is significant at  $\alpha = 0.0361 < 0.0500$ . As age increases, empathy level decreases.

The non-parametric regression analysis showed that with a 95% confidence, the real value of the slope of the linear regression line for age and empathy level is around -4 to 0. The formula here can be estimated as  $y = 84 + (-2)x$ . Thus, age affects empathy level.

### **Effect of Sex on Reading Fiction of Respondents**

There is a relationship between sex and reading fiction with a z value  $= -5.934$ . The relationship is significant at  $\alpha = 0.000 < 0.050$ . The mean rank of RF scores of males is 112.96 while that of the females is 174.19. The females have higher RF scores than the males. Also, in this study, more females (74.1%) consider reading as a hobby and they read fiction and non-fiction materials.

### **Effect of Sex on Empathy Level of Respondents**

There is a relationship between sex and empathy level with a z value  $= -5.488$ . The relationship is significant at  $\alpha = 0.000 < 0.050$ . The mean rank of empathy scores of males is 115.93 while that of the females is 172.38. The females have higher empathy scores than the males.

### **Effect of Reading Fiction on Empathy Level of Respondents**

The rank correlation of reading fiction and empathy level shows a very weak positive relationship with tau  $b = 0.147176$ . Their relationship is significant at  $\alpha = 0.0004 < 0.0500$ . As reading fiction increases, empathy level increases.

The non-parametric regression analysis showed that with a 95% confidence, the real value of the slope of the linear regression line for reading fiction and empathy level is near 0.1 to 0.153846. The formula here can be estimated as  $y = 49 + (0.125)x$ . Thus, reading fiction affects empathy level.

## **Discussion**

### **Reading Fiction (RF) Level of Respondents**

More than a third of the respondents belong to the moderate level. Uusen and Mürsepp (2012) found that among their adolescent respondents, there were 45% who are “good readers”, 39% are “average readers” and 15% are “bad readers/don’t like reading at all”. More respondents in this study have moderate RF scores. It may be that the level/scale rating for this study came from quantitative analysis while that of Uusen and Mürsepp’s (2012) is qualitative and their respondents were younger at 15 years old.

Despite the moderate RF level of most respondents, 56% of the respondents stated that reading is a hobby for them. Gleed (2013) found that 21% of the high readers in his study loved to read and considered it as a hobby. Perhaps, being college students makes them love reading not only for academic purposes but also as a leisure activity. This is not surprising since one of the reasons given by respondents who have reading as a hobby is because reading is a way of learning. Other reasons they stated were reading improves one's vocabulary, it is a way of escape, it is interesting, it is a way of communicating with the world, and it is already a habit from childhood. Gleed (2013) stated that some of the high readers in his study grew up in houses with available books and had parents who encouraged them to read.

Those who do not consider reading as a hobby and had low RF scores reasoned that they had no good books, no time, and were not interested. Gleed (2013) also observed these reasons from the low readers in his study. Based on the in-depth interviews done in this study, those who have high RF scores read 7-10 times a week while those who have low RF scores only read 1-2 times a week. The readers made time for reading.

There were as many respondents who preferred fiction reading as both fiction and non-fiction reading. Gleed (2013) also observed that his respondents preferred fiction (26%) slightly more than non-fiction (22%). The National Library Board of Singapore (2016) found that fiction reading (93%) was lower than non-fiction reading (98%). More recently, Loan and Shah (2017) found that fiction was the most preferred literature genre among public high school students in India. Based on the interviews, the fiction readers said they preferred fiction due to it being imaginative, creative, and entertaining. Similarly, other adolescents said that it is a means of entertainment and escape and that it may offer scenarios which can be applied to real life (National Library Board, 2016).

Reading actual books remains to be the most preferred medium (Loan & Shah, 2017; National Library Board, 2016; Gleed, 2013). Based on the interviews in this study, most respondents liked actual books better since these have inherent value, are affordable in paperback versions, and because gadget screens are straining and hurtful to the eyes due to blue light emission.

### **Empathy Level of the Respondents**

More than three-fourths of the respondents had a high empathy level. Allemand et al. (2015) discovered relatively high degrees of stability in empathy among adolescents, aged 12-16, within the per year stability correlations. Empathy increased during adolescence. Further, adolescent empathy predicted the following outcomes two decades later at age 35: adult empathy, communication skills, social integration, relationship satisfaction, and conflicts in relationships. Van der Graaff et al. (2014) found that adolescents, generally, show an increase in two kinds of empathy: cognitive empathy (the ability to understand another's perspective) and affective empathy (the ability to recognize other's emotions and respond to these). Possible reasons for this could be greater social networks and interactions and higher cognitive abilities with the development of the prefrontal cortex. This brain region is significant for social cognition and helps adolescents think about how their actions can affect their lives and other people.

### **Effect of Age on Reading Fiction of Respondents**

Age and reading fiction have a significant relationship. The findings contradict the results of Stansfield and Bunce (2014) where age has a significantly positively relationship with fiction exposure. This observed decline in reading fiction could be due to the presence of other activities which are also interesting and entertaining such as video games, watching movies at

home, sports activities, and social media connections via the Internet (Ingraham, 2016; Denby, 2016).

Age also has an impact on reading fiction. The number of respondents in this study who considers reading a hobby started to decline at age 18-22 from 33.5% to 1.2%. Those who prefer fiction also declined from 32.9% to 1.3% from age 18-22. More than half of the interviewees [5 of 8] think that age may have nothing to do with reading fiction but by the way one is brought up or with the personal interests of the individual. They think that some older people more likely prefer non-fiction to know more about reality while adolescents read fiction more because they like discovering new things about the world and are trying to explore and establish their self-identity.

### **Effect of Age on Empathy Level of Respondents**

Age influences empathy level. Much as there are studies which show otherwise (Allemand et al., 2015; Van der Graaff et al., 2014), Oh et al. (2020) found through their longitudinal study that empathy increases with age. They suggest that in adolescence and early adulthood, bigger social networks and even, traveling may widen one's perspectives about people and contexts, leading to increases in empathy. Sun et al. (2018) found that cognitive empathy decreases but affective empathy increases over the lifespan. This is due to a neural mechanism which may give rise to different developmental trajectories for these two empathy types. Further, psychological mechanisms such as the perspective taking, empathic accuracy, compassion and personal distress may also influence empathy (Beadle & De la Vega, 2019).

All who were interviewed perceived that age influences empathy. A 17-year-old female said that it is due to them knowing "what's happening about the world around them." A 19-year-old male said that it is "due to the accumulated experiences that guide older people."

### **Effect of Sex on Reading Fiction of Respondents**

Sex and reading fiction have a significant association. Linnakylä (2000 as cited in Uusen & Mürsepp, 2012) observed that out of 53% of pupils aged 15 in Finland who said that they read fiction a couple of times in a month, there were 41% of females and 12% of males in the group. The National Library Board (2016) saw this trend too with more females reading fiction, particularly, mysteries and thrillers followed by romance and love stories. In a more recent study, Loan and Shah (2017) found that females have a higher preference for fiction than the males with more of the females preferring romance and poetry while the males preferred crime and horror fiction.

Among those interviewed in this study, only two perceived that there are more girls who read fiction but the rest suggested that reading fiction may also depend on the way one is brought up or on the personal interests of the individual.

### **Effect of Sex on Empathy Level of Respondents**

There is a sex difference for empathy with females manifesting higher empathy levels. In earlier studies, Whalen (2010) found that females scored higher than males on empathy and its four dimensions: personal distress, perspective taking, fantasy and empathic concern. Sharafat and Zubair (2013) discovered that females showed more affective empathy, emotional responsiveness, and susceptibility to emotional contagion than males. Van der Graaff et al. (2014) found that cognitive empathy rises steadily in girls starting at age 13 but that males only start manifesting this by age 15. This was attributed to emerging cognitive abilities due to neural maturation. Affective empathy among female adolescents is high and quite stable in this

stage while males show a temporary decline between ages 13-16 most likely due to increased testosterone levels brought about by pubertal changes (Stuijzand et al., 2016). Aside from these explanations, sex differences in empathy levels may also be due to the gender role intensification theory (Hill & Lynch, 1983 as cited in Van der Graaff, 2014) or the greater expectations of society and social groups that males and females act accordingly with gender role expectations of strength, softness, expressiveness, and the like.

In a more recent study, Stuijzand et al. (2016) found that female adolescents manifested higher empathy in a cross-sectional study and that female adolescents showed higher empathy over time in a longitudinal study although empathy also increased among the males. The increase was attributed to the development of peer and romantic relationships in this stage which may heighten the showing of empathy during interactions.

All of those who were interviewed agreed that sex influences empathy with 7 out of 8 saying that they perceive females as more empathic. A 17-year-old male said that this may happen because “it is stereotypical for males to be tough while females are expected to be more caring and understanding.” A 19-year-old female said that “females are more empathic because they seem to listen more and are more expressive by nature.”

### **Effect of Reading Fiction on Empathy Level of Respondents**

Reading fiction influences empathy level. Reading fiction stories was found to determine emotions of individuals (Djicic et al., 2009) and physical sensations (Berns et al., 2013). Stansfield and Bunce (2014) also found a causal relationship for empathy capability and reading fiction. Kidd and Castano (2013) found that literary fiction readers had higher empathy scores than those who read non-fiction or popular fiction genres.

Bal and Veltkamp (2013) and Johnson (2012) point to the connection of “emotional transportation” or being emotionally involved in reading fiction with empathy level. Readers focus on the story and become immersed in this narrative world for the duration of the reading. With fiction, the character’s thoughts and emotions are depicted with an openness to the reader’s interpretations and the readers explore and may extend the character’s emotions and motivations. The readers may identify with the characters and become emotionally involved with them or respond to them especially, as both fortunate and unfortunate events happen to the characters (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2009). In a later study, Mar (2014) found that greater immersion in a fiction story predicted higher empathy levels and that social emotions are enhanced with reading fiction. As readers try to understand the thoughts and emotions of the characters, they can widen their perspectives about humans and social interactions in various contexts and cultures. Readers may integrate into their self-concepts a caring character and empathic behaviors in their daily life.

In the interviews, half of the respondents agreed that reading fiction can affect their empathy level since they can relate to the characters and can learn many things from the storyline the characters experience. A 17-year-old female said that this is “because I learn many things from reading.” A 20-year-old male said that “if one reads, one can relate more to the characters as well as real people.”

The other half said that reading fiction may affect empathy if the reader can relate with the story’s protagonist(s) or absorb the character’s feelings problems, and conditions. A 17-year-old female said that “it depends if you absorb the feeling of the characters enough as your own to affect your real life.” Also, a 21-year-old male said that “it depends on what a person is

reading, thoughts of the fiction characters, and whether or not, you are able to process what you are reading, enough to apply it in your real life.”

### **Implications**

The results of this study indicate that age has an effect on reading fiction and empathy, there are sex differences in reading fiction and empathy, and reading fiction predicts empathy levels. What cannot be deduced from this study are possible mediating factors between reading fiction and empathy. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) and Johnson (2012) point to the role of emotional transportation or immersion in the narrative while reading. This could be considered as a separate variable in future research as related to reading fiction, cognitive and affective empathy or its accepted components, and gender differences.

To take the results further, it is recommended that early adolescents along with emerging adults be included to investigate developmental trends in reading fiction and empathy in a wider sample. The fiction reading scale in the questionnaire can explore more about the type of fiction read, fiction sources, and the media forms of fiction.

Fortunately, in the Philippines, Literature is a required subject throughout secondary education. Educational institutions can use Literature as an avenue to highlight the social value of fiction and fiction reading. Parents, school library organizations, and the media can promote reading fiction and fiction materials appropriate to the youth. This can be done by starting school and community book clubs, increasing fiction book choices in the school and community library, advocating the benefits of reading fiction in their Language & Reading classes/programs, or advocating the benefits of reading in various shows and advertisements. Further, it is recommended that adolescents and young adults, especially males, engage in reading fiction through their preferred media for empathy enhancement.

Current findings may be used to establish empathy training programs in schools and communities in the country. The youth can be trained to infer the mental and emotional states of real people and fictional characters. There could be potential benefits in exposing the youth to different ways of empathy enhancement. Fiction reading in various genre and formats can be included in such a program.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study adds to the growing body of research that delve into the relationships between reading fiction and empathy. Specifically, it shows that reading fiction and empathy increases with age, females’ manifest higher fiction reading and empathy, and reading fiction increases empathy. Also, previous studies (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2009) which found that reading fiction is related to empathy were done on young adults in developed countries. This study shows that, in developing countries, reading fiction among adolescents and young adults can also increase empathic levels.

Investigating cognitive and affective empathy in adolescents and young adults are critical to their socio-cognitive development. This also helps older adults guiding adolescents and young adults to better understand the potential of reading fiction to increase the youth’s understanding of the minds and emotions of the people they encounter daily in the real world.

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