

You Are What You Read: The Relationship Between Experience-Taking and Performance



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ABSTRACT

The process by which readers engage with characters in a narrative is referred to as experience-taking. Through this process, purportedly, readers lose self-awareness as they adopt a character's perspective. In Study 1, participants read a narrative about a character that performed successfully on an achievement task - anagram solving - and then they solved anagrams themselves. According to the results, higher reported levels of experience-taking were associated with enhanced anagram performance. In Study 2, participants read a narrative written in either a first- or third-person perspective in which a character either performed successfully or unsuccessfully on a test of verbal ability. Although neither perspective type nor character outcome exerted differential effects on performance, regression analyses indicated that self-reported levels of experience taking, perceived similarity to the character and feelings of inspiration derived from the character's performance predicted enhanced anagram performance, and similarity was found to mediate the relationship between experience-taking and performance. Discussion focuses on both the theoretical and practical implications of the association between experience taking and performance.

INTRODUCTION

- Experience-taking is an imaginative process whereby a reader "becomes" a character in a narrative.
 - The reader experiences the events of the narrative as if they were that character, assuming his/her thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits (Kaufman, 2009).
- Previous research has indicated that when readers engage in experience-taking...
 - They can experience great pleasure through the exploration of possible selves (Green et al., 2004).
 - They may attribute the character's personality traits to the self (Kaufman & Libby, 2009).
 - They may be motivated to obtain similar goals as the character and possible have an increase in optimism about their ability to reach that goal (Green, 2005).
- Several factors can influence whether or not experience-taking will occur. Some of those are...
 - High perceived similarity with the character → experience-taking (Cohen, 2001; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Kaufman & Libby, 2012).
 - Low self concept accessibility → experience-taking (Kaufman, 2009; Kaufman & Libby, 2012)
 - First person narrative voice vs. third person narrative voice → experience-taking (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Oatley, 1999)

STUDY 1

GOAL

- Assess whether differential levels of self-reported experience-taking would be associated with enhanced performance on a task similar to the one engaged in by the main character of the narrative

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants ($n = 133$) were initially recruited (38 males, 68 females and 2 who did not identify). Twenty-five participants were excluded from all analyses leaving 108 total participants in the final sample.

PROCEDURE

- Anagram Task (time 1)
 - Twenty total anagrams, ten given at time 1 and ten given at time 2.
 - Participants are asked to unscramble a series of letters into as many words as possible (e.g., EHCPA)
- Narrative
 - Describes a student who is applying for an academic scholarship. For the application, the student must complete a verbal task. The student scores very highly and receives the scholarship.
- Experience-Taking Scale (Kaufman & Libby, 2012)
 - E.g., I found myself thinking what the character in the story was thinking (1-strongly disagree, 9-strongly agree)
- Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000)
 - E.g., While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind (R) (1-not at all, 7-very much)
- Recall of information from narrative
- Assessment of expectations and confidence
 - E.g., How well do you think you will perform on a task similar to the one the character completed? (1-not well at all, 7-very well)
- Anagram Task (time 2)

STUDY 1 RESULTS

- Significant correlation between experience-taking and performance ($r = .23, p < .05$).
- Significant correlation between perceived similarity and experience-taking ($r = .56, p < .001$).

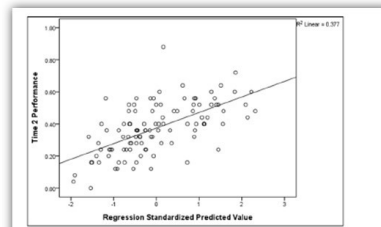


Figure 1. Correlation Between Experience-Taking and Performance (Study 1)

STUDY 2

GOAL

- Manipulate experience-taking and assess its' effect on performance

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants ($n = 125$) were initially recruited. Twenty-seven participants were excluded from all analyses leaving 98 total participants in the final sample (29 males and 69 females).

PROCEDURE

- Anagram Task (time 1)
- Narrative (depending on condition)
 - 2 (Perspective: first vs. third) X 2 (Character Outcome: success vs. failure) between-participants design
- Experience-Taking Scale (Kaufman & Libby, 2012)
- Recall of information from narrative
- Assessment of thoughts about the character
 - E.g., I feel that I am similar to the character in the story (1 - strongly disagree, 7 - strongly agree)
- Self-efficacy measure (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001)
- State self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991)
- Anagram Task (time 2)

STUDY 2 RESULTS

- Significant correlation between experience-taking and similarity ($r = .55, p < .001$) and performance ($r = .21, p < .05$).
- Significant correlation between similarity and performance ($p = .28, p < .01$).

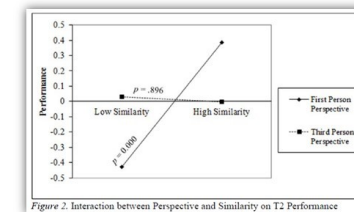


Figure 2. Interaction between Perspective and Similarity on T2 Performance

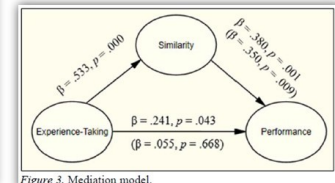


Figure 3. Mediation model.

CONCLUSION

- Summary of results
 - Study 1 provided preliminary evidence for an association between self-reported levels of experience-taking and performance.
 - Study 2 attempted to manipulate experience-taking and sought to examine the differential effects of character outcome (succeeding vs. failing) on participants' performance.
 - Although neither the perspective-taking manipulation nor the outcome manipulation exerted differential effects on performance, experience taking, similarity and inspiration were found to be positively associated with performance.
 - In addition, similarity was found to predict performance when the narrative was written in the first person, and similarity was also found to mediate the relationship between experience taking and performance among participants assigned to the first-person perspective condition.
- Future research
 - Specify mechanisms by which similarity perceptions influence performance
 - Compare social comparison to experience-taking to measure differential effects on performance
 - Can experience-taking lead to adoption of negative or harmful beliefs, goals, traits, and/or behaviors?
- Application
 - Readers who engage in experience-taking with a successful character increase their own confidence that they can excel similarly. This same process has the potential to be used to encourage children to perform better in an educational setting.