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For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov

By *PAM BELLUCK*

Say you are getting ready for a blind date or a job interview. What should you do? Besides shower and shave, of course, it turns out you should read — but not just anything. Something by Chekhov or Alice Munro will help you navigate new social territory better than a potboiler by Danielle Steel.

That is the conclusion of a study published Thursday in the journal *Science*. It found that after reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or serious nonfiction, people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence — skills that come in especially handy when you are trying to read someone's body language or gauge what they might be thinking.

The researchers say the reason is that literary fiction often leaves more to the imagination, encouraging readers to make inferences about characters and be sensitive to emotional nuance and complexity.

“This is why I love science,” Louise Erdrich, whose novel “The Round House” was used in one of the experiments, wrote in an e-mail. The researchers, she said, “found a way to prove true the intangible benefits of literary fiction.”

“Thank God the research didn't find that novels increased tooth decay or blocked up your arteries,” she added.

The researchers, social psychologists at the New School for Social Research in New York City, recruited their subjects through that über-purveyor of reading material, Amazon.com. To find a broader pool of participants than the usual college students, they used Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, where people sign up to earn money for completing small jobs.

People ranging in age from 18 to 75 were recruited for each of five experiments. They were paid \$2 or \$3 each to read for a few minutes. Some were given excerpts from award-winning literary fiction (Don DeLillo, Wendell Berry). Others were given best sellers like Gillian Flynn's “Gone Girl,” a Rosamunde Pilcher romance or a Robert Heinlein science fiction tale.

In one experiment, some participants were given nonfiction excerpts, but we're not talking “All the President's Men.” To maximize the contrast, the researchers — looking for nonfiction that was well-written, but not literary or about people — turned to

Smithsonian Magazine. “How the Potato Changed the World” was one selection. “Bamboo Steps Up” was another.

After reading — or in some cases reading nothing — the participants took computerized tests that measure people’s ability to decode emotions or predict a person’s expectations or beliefs in a particular scenario. In one test, called “Reading the Mind in the Eyes,” subjects did just that: they studied 36 photographs of pairs of eyes and chose which of four adjectives best described the emotion each showed.

Is the woman with the smoky eyes aghast or doubtful? Is the man whose gaze has slivered to a squint suspicious or indecisive? Is she interested or irritated, flirtatious or hostile? Is he fantasizing or guilty, dominant or horrified? Or annoyed that his tech stock dropped half a percent on the Nasdaq in a round of late trading after news from the Middle East? (Just kidding — that last one isn’t on the test.)

The idea that what we read might influence our social and emotional skills is not new. Previous studies have correlated various types of reading with empathy and sensitivity. More recently, in a field called “theory of mind,” scientists have used emotional intelligence perception tests to study, for example, children with autism.

But psychologists and other experts said the new study was powerful because it suggested a direct effect — quantifiable by measuring how many right and wrong answers people got on the tests — from reading literature for only a few minutes.

“It’s a really important result,” said Nicholas Humphrey, an evolutionary psychologist who has written extensively about human intelligence, and who was not involved in the research. “That they would have subjects read for three to five minutes and that they would get these results is astonishing.”

Dr. Humphrey, an emeritus professor at Cambridge University’s Darwin College, said he would have expected that reading generally would make people more empathetic and understanding. “But to separate off literary fiction, and to demonstrate that it has different effects from the other forms of reading, is remarkable,” he said.

Experts said the results implied that people could be primed for social skills like empathy, just as watching a clip from a sad movie can make one feel more emotional.

“This really nails down the causal direction,” said Keith Oatley, an emeritus professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto who was not involved in the study. “These people have done not one experiment but five, and they have found the same effects.”

The researchers — Emanuele Castano, a psychology professor, and David Comer Kidd, a doctoral candidate — found that people who read literary fiction scored better than those who read popular fiction. This was true even though, when asked, subjects said they did not enjoy literary fiction as much. Literary fiction readers also scored better than

nonfiction readers — and popular fiction readers made as many mistakes as people who read nothing.

There is much the study does not address: How long could such effects last? Would three months of reading Charles Dickens and Jane Austen produce larger or smaller effects, or have no impact? Are the differences in scores all attributable to the type of material read? Would the results hold if the same person read all of the types? And would it matter if the literary fiction was particularly difficult? (Nobody was asked to read James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon.)

The study's authors and other academic psychologists said such findings should be considered by educators designing curriculums, particularly the Common Core standards adopted by most states, which assign students more nonfiction.

“Frankly, I agree with the study,” said Albert Wendland, who directs a master's program in writing popular fiction at Seton Hill University. “Reading sensitive and lengthy explorations of people's lives, that kind of fiction is literally putting yourself into another person's position — lives that could be more difficult, more complex, more than what you might be used to in popular fiction. It makes sense that they will find that, yeah, that can lead to more empathy and understanding of other lives.”

He added: “Maybe popular fiction is a way of dealing more with one's own self, maybe, with one's own wants, desires, needs.”

In popular fiction, said Mr. Kidd, one of the researchers, “really the author is in control, and the reader has a more passive role.”

In literary fiction, like Dostoyevsky, “there is no single, overarching authorial voice,” he said. “Each character presents a different version of reality, and they aren't necessarily reliable. You have to participate as a reader in this dialectic, which is really something you have to do in real life.”

Dr. Castano added that, in many cases, “popular fiction seems to be more focused on the plot.”

“Characters can be interchangeable and usually more stereotypical in the way they are described,” he said.

Ms. Erdrich, the author, said the study made her feel “personally cheered.”

“Writers are often lonely obsessives, especially the literary ones. It's nice to be told what we write is of social value,” she said. “However, I would still write even if novels were useless.”

Want to help the researchers with their work? You can participate.

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 3, 2013

An earlier version of this story misidentified Louise Erdrich's "The Round House" as a short story. It is a novel.

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