When readers talk about characters *as if* they were real, how do they talk about them?

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an often-repeated claim in the literature on readers that they talk about characters *as if* they were real. Underpinning this perception is a belief in the occurrence of empathy between reader and character. Through the analysis of five reading group discussions of *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave*,* this article explores how talk about characters *as if* they were real is performed. The article adds to the field, providing an enhanced inter-disciplinary understanding of empathy and a new framework for analysing this important phenomenon in book talk.

The paper begins by validating the focus of study, reading groups, before introducing the concepts of empathy and gossip which underpin the analysis. A dynamic systems approach to discourse analysis is adopted, leading to the identification of seven processes (automatic empathy, attribution, positioning, stereotyping, extension, mediation and synechdocal interpretation) that readers perform when talking about characters *as if* they were real. Occurrences of automatic empathy were rare, but readers frequently engaged in more deliberate forms of socially-bound empathy (attribution and positioning). Readers were found to gossip about characters, evaluating their behaviour by drawing on a range of social knowledge, personal experience, textual detail and extensions of the text. These negotiated evaluations, sometimes mediated through other perspectives, led to understanding of characters that ranged from complex individuality to stereotypes.

Further, by foregrounding the role of empathy and the interaction between reader, character and social groups, the findings support research that argues reading groups can be important sites for intellectual and social development, with synechdocal interpretation suggested as a potential driver for prosocial behaviour emerging from book talk.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Readers and literary study

This research follows a trend in literary linguistics which has seen increased attention on readers. It represents a shift from early approaches influenced by the affective fallacy (Wimsatt, Jr. & Beardsley, 1954) that rejected the reader as an object of study. [1] Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that attempts to assess literature based on the psychological effects of reading lead to relativism as each response to a text is unique to the individual and so holds little analytic value. Early reader-response theory (Iser, 1974; Jauss, 1970) addressed this by utilising models such as the implied reader, a product of text-structured responses, or the ideal reader, who shares the same codes as the author, in order to analyse texts. More recent reader-response research has incorporated actual readers following an experimental paradigm (cf: Hakemulder, 2000; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Miall, 2008). However, this approach cannot account for the particularities of readers in context.

Instead, as Myers argues, we need to consider reading 'not just [as] a cognitive process that takes place in readers' heads' but realise that 'readers are engaged prospectively in social encounters from the moment they pick up [a book].' (2009, p. 339) When people read they engage with other potential readers, and so their account of reading is subject to changes and shifts when they talk about the text. The initial reading of the novel provides a foundation for later reading-in-talk events that are naturally occurring and accessible for analysis. Attention to social reading has begun to increase with focus on large scale reading events (Benwell, 2009; Fuller, 2008; Fuller & Procter, 2009; Lang, 2009), group discussions of books in school (Boler, 1997; Eriksson & Aronsson, 2004, 2005) alongside book clubs and reading groups.

To better account for social reading and reading-in-talk, this study draws on book history (Feather, 2007; Gutjahr, 2002; Lamb, 2005; Rose, 2006) and, more specifically, reception studies (Hermes, 1995;

---

[1] Despite earlier research that incorporated actual readers, i.e. Richards (1929).

Long, 1987, 2003; Radway, 1984) to provide a fuller understanding of reading as a situated and contextual response to the text. In doing so, it takes an empirical approach involving the analysis of naturally-occurring reading events, as reading group data better reflect the dynamic, social nature of reading (Allington & Benwell, 2012; Peplow, 2011) in contrast to responses triggered in experimental conditions.

Research into reading groups has found that discussions are often dominated by the consideration of characters (Hartley, 2001; Long, 2003; Poole, 2003; M. W. Smith, 1996). Historically, awareness of this focus on character has led to criticism of book clubs as being detrimental to literary culture (Kappel, 1948), heightened by the perception of them as feminine spaces (cf: Trubey, 2005). However, through the investigation of social reading, we can gain nuanced insights into how readers engage with characters and the impact this has on readers' perception of themselves and other social groups (Boler, 1997; Burwell, 2007; Chabot Davis, 2004, 2008; Trubey, 2005). This research has shown that reading groups can be sites of intellectual and social development, with discussion of character an important element leading to shifts in attitudes, greater social and intercultural awareness, increased empathy and potentially prosocial behaviour.[2] While reading groups are an obvious site for the analysis of literary interpretation, there is a broader value in analysing reading group discourse and, particularly, how readers talk about characters.

As a starting point, we can draw on Long's (1986, 1987, 1992, 2003) seminal work on reading groups. She argued that readers 'often respond directly to fictional characters *as if* they were real people, discussing whether they like or dislike, admire or despise them, rather than focusing on how or why authors may have constructed such characters' (Long, 1986, p. 606). Poole (2003) makes a similar assertion, stating that characters are discussed as if they were real people when readers attempt to justify their behaviour and examine and speculate on their motives. This is an underlying assumption

---

[2] Prosocial behaviour is behaviour that is altruistic and benefits others and society more generally. It is difficult to quantify and measure as an effect of reading literature. (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; cf: Keen, 2007)

in previous research, whether philosophical (Valentino, 2005), sociological (Long, 2003), psychological (Kidd & Castano, 2013), or grounded in literary theory (Keen, 2007) or cultural studies (Boler, 1997), that readers treat characters *as if* they were real. Quantitative evidence for this can be found in Allington's (2011) corpus analysis of book group discussions: the 'character/characters' lemma was the most key item, and lemmas associated with characters' constructed natures rarely featuring.

This article explores how readers talk about characters *as if* they were real by examining reading group discussions. Building on the above research, I focussed on empathy between reader and character as this most often underpins the assumption that readers talk about characters *as if* they were real – hereafter referred to as '*as if* real talk'. Empathy is a much theorised concept, so I will now establish how it is understood in this research.

2.2 Empathy

'Empathy' is a relatively new term in English. Its closest antecedent would be 'sympathy' as used in the work of philosophers such as Smith (1976 [1759]) and Hume (2004 [1739]).[3] 'Empathy' itself was a translation of the German *Einfühlung* (literally: in-feeling) introduced by Lipps to explore aesthetics and interpersonal understanding. He used empathy to describe fusion between observer and object resulting in 'inner imitation', where 'movements and affective expressions are "instinctively" and simultaneously mirrored by kinesthetic "strivings" and the experience of corresponding feelings' (Montag et al., 2008, p. 1261). Stein (1964 [1917]) saw a confusion in Lipps's account of empathy. Rather than a fusion between the Self and Other, she distinguishes between primordial experience, which is present and bodily, and non-primordial experience, which is psychological. For Stein, the act of empathy is the movement of the primordial experience of the Other to the non-primordial experience of the Self. In Lipps' understanding of fusion between observer and aesthetic object and Stein's refinement of his work, we have a hypothetical basis for understanding empathy across the

---

[3] Sympathy should be considered an emotional response triggered by observed experience; for example, pity for someone's misery.

boundary of fiction and a potential impetus for *as if* real talk. When reading, people fuse with the fictional character and convert fictional primordial experiences into non-primordial human experience.

In contemporary research, it becomes clear that empathy is best understood as an umbrella term comprising multiple automatic and deliberate processes. For example, De Waal presents empathy as a progression from automatic to deliberate in his three stage model:

(a) be affected by and share the emotional state of another

(b) assess the reasons for the other's state

(c) identify with the other, adopting his or her perspective. (2008, pp. 281–282)

Automatic empathy is connected to Lipps' suggestion of 'instinctive mirroring' with humans having an automatic capacity to mirror the experiences of others. A potential neural explanation for automatic empathy can be found in mirror neurons (di Pellegrino et al., 1992; Rizzolatti et al., 1996) but further study is required to substantiate such claims (Kilner & Lemon, 2013). Gallese and Goldman (1998) also conjecture that mirror neurons provide the basic foundation of the simulation theory of 'mind reading'. Briefly: this is the idea that we simulate others' experiences in order to predict their actions or motivations. These simulations allow us to imaginatively take the perspective of the Other. Simulation theory has been used as a foundation for research on literary empathy from a cognitive slant (Mar & Oatley, 2008). While compelling, simulation theory is yet to be fully supported by the available evidence from the scientific research. However, there is broad agreement that most humans have some innate and automatic capacity to empathise (cf. Batson, 2009) and this has been observed in responses to fictional characters (Hakemulder, 2000; Hunt, 2000; Keen, 2007; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015).

Following De Waal (2008), we might consider the more deliberate processes of empathy in terms of identification (seeing the self in the other) and perspective taking (adopting the position of the other). Galinksy et al. describe these as 'the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual's viewpoint' (2008, p. 378). However, we require further nuance in our understanding of how this is done. Batson (2009), collating work in social neuroscience, identified eight different concepts that are labelled empathy, ranging from automatic processes to sympathetic responses. Three of his concepts usefully characterise different aspects of identification and perspective taking:

> Concept 4: Intuiting or Projecting Oneself into Another's Situation.
>
> Concept 5: Imagining How Another is Thinking and Feeling
>
> Concept 6: Imagining How One Would Think and Feel in the Other's Place
>
> (Batson, 2009, pp. 6–7)

Concept 4 relates to Lipp's original conception of *Einfühlung*, where there is a fusion between Self and Other. Batson, borrowing from Stotland (1969), characterised concept 5 as the imagine-other perspective and concept 6 as the imagine-self perspective. In Concept 5, rather than becoming the Other, attempts are made to understand the Other as an entity separate to the Self. In concept 6, the Self shifts to the position of the Other, but supplants them in order to experience their situation in relation to the Self. These related but slightly differing understandings are not mutually exclusive and suggest different processes of how readers may engage with fictional characters.

Perspective taking is important because of its potential to operate beyond automatic empathy (Danziger et al., 2009). Empathic responses may be activated more easily when there is a greater degree of likeness between Self and Other, but in many contexts empathy has to overcome difference. For example, Halpern and Weinstein, writing on conflict resolution, concluded that the 'the work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may

find it quite difficult to share.' (2004, p. 581). This is particularly important if we consider literary empathy, as there is divergence in experience and ontology between person and fictional entity.

It is also important to remember that empathy is a process between two separate entities and complete inter-subjectivity is impossible (Pedersen, 2008). For this reason, I think it is necessary to extend perspective taking to include self-other differentiation, as characterised by Bakhtin's notion of *vzhivanie*, translated as 'live entering' and later 'creative understanding' (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 53; Valentino, 2005). Bakhtin originally envisaged the term as a rejection of what he saw as 'mere empathy', perspective taking that fused Self and Other. Instead, Bakhtin advocated a form of empathy where alterity is maintained alongside shifts in perspective. This highlights a need to consider the social context of both participants in any account of empathy. The concept of gossip is introduced in section 1.3 to account for this.

Valentino (2005) recognised in *vzhivanie* a shift from aesthetics to ethics, no longer the fusion with art seen by Lipps but rather a consideration of the differences between Self and Other, where 'novels are ethical testing grounds, with surrogate life experiences that can serve as material for *vzhivanie*.' (Valentino, 2005, p. 16). Valentino's stance is in line with studies of examining the role of reading groups in personal and social development, and we find evidence for this in the discussion of *The Other Hand*.

2.2.1 Literary Empathy

Keen (2007, pp. 169–170) argues that empathy for fictional characters requires only minimal elements rather than complex characterisation. The assumption is that readers will begin reading with the desire to empathise with characters. Zunshine (2006) and Palmer (2002, 2004, 2007, 2009), both taking a cognitive approach, go further to suggest that it is through identification that readers navigate texts and these form the basis for interpretation – although without empirically applying their ideas.

Whiteley adopts Palmer's concept of attribution to discuss readers' propensity to 'mind read' characters, which is connected to their ability to 'attribute mental states to real people in everyday

7

life' (2010, p. 114); readers expect characters to be similar to ourselves in basic mechanics, so are treated as human. Whiteley (2010, 2011) provides a persuasive cognitive account of empathy through the combination of textual analysis and responses from reading group discussions. Her application of attribution demonstrates a way of understanding how readers ascribe motivations to character based on real-world knowledge. (Further consideration to attribution is given in section 4.2.)

In summary, empathy is a collection of automatic and deliberate processes connecting self and other. These can facilitate understanding based on similarity but also, potentially, overcome differences. This capacity becomes important when considering the relative status of reader and character. Firstly, that readers are able to overcome the barrier of fictionality to, temporarily, see 'combinations of graphemes as real beings' (Valentino, 2005, p. 110) and, secondly, engage with characters whose experiences may be very different from their own (Boler, 1997; Chabot Davis, 2004). Because of this difference in experience, I would argue that a social component is necessary and so I introduce the concept of gossip.

2.3 Gossip

If we are to progress beyond 'mere' empathy and encompass differentiation between self and other, then we have to consider how empathic connections are embedded within the social. As will be shown, readers utilise social knowledge to understand and evaluate characters in talk. By drawing on the concept of gossip, we can situate empathy within the social and better understand *as if* real talk.

In a general sense, gossip is talk about people rather than things, 'rapport talk' as opposed to 'report talk' (D. Cameron, 1998, p. 276). Norbert Elias (Elias, 1974; Elias & Scotson, 1974) was the first to suggest the significance of gossip by highlighting its importance in maintaining social interdependencies. He saw gossip as a means by which different social groups within a community navigated their relationships through praise and blame. Similarly, Deborah Cameron argued that talk is gossip when the purpose of discussion is social interaction and negotiation of identity, 'affirming the solidarity of an in-group by constructing absent others as an out-group, whose behaviour is minutely

8

examined' (1998, p. 273). Gossip becomes a mode of talk about non-present community members, which involves the examination of behaviour as warranting praise or blame in order to negotiate Self/Other identity. In this respect, it interacts with empathy, adding a social component to understanding the other, beyond a connection based on shared humanity (automatic empathy).

The connection between gossip and fiction has precedence in the work of Bloom (2010). He argues that an evolved response to our desire for social information, in essence gossip, is a driver for the pleasure we experience from stories and the impetus for empathy with fictional characters. Like Valentino and Keen, there is an assumption that our default position is to empathise with characters. We also see discussion of gossip in research directly on reading groups, with Poole (2003, p. 273) using the term to characterise her findings. However, she does not engage with the implications of its use.

Different discursive features have been suggested as markers of gossip, for example, topic development, minimal responses, epistemic modality and simultaneous speech (Coates, 1998). While examples of these features can be seen in the data, as Cameron (1998) argues, gossiping is done differently by different groups. So instead, I focus on gossip as talk about others based on personal and social relationships.

One way of understanding how gossip might be done in book talk, is through the concept of positioning from social psychology (Harré, 2012; Harré et al., 2009; Harré & Langenhove, 1991). Harré & Langenhove proposed positioning as an alternative 'to the static concept of role' (1991, p. 393), focusing on the dynamic process of identification through communication and interaction. By foregrounding the process of communication, positions are not fixed categorizations nor codified roles, but rather emergent in the discourse creating 'a cluster of short-term disputable rights, obligations and duties' (Harré, 2012, p. 193). For example, whether a character is positioned as a child, teenager or young adult, will influence what social norms they are expected to conform to and so how their behavior is evaluated. Collectively, this positioning and evaluation could be considered gossip.

Positioning provides a possible means for understanding how empathy in discourse is situated within social, cultural and historical systems. Further, if readers draw on socio-cultural knowledge derived from 'real' world experience, then the positioning of characters arguably underpins *as if* real talk: characters are talked about as non-present but real, rather than fictional. Through the iterative coding of the data (see section 3.3), occurrences of positioning were identified and subsequently analysed (section 4.2).

3. METHODOLOGY

I follow Allington and Benwell's (2012, p. 218) assertion that: 'an individual's responses to a text—and descriptions of [their] prior responses… may be as myriad as the occasions on which [they] are elicited'. Therefore, I treat the discussion data as 'situated account[s] occasioned by the specific conditions in which [they are] produced' (Allington & Benwell, 2012, p. 218-230). Individuals' responses are shaped by the book club context and the ongoing discussion. While readers may report on solitary reading experiences and reactions, these are necessarily accounts occasioned by the interactional context and so it is reading-in-talk (Myers, 2009) that is observed and analysed.

This being the case, it was necessary to take a discourse analytic approach to the data, specifically a dynamic systems approach that draws on the work of Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (see section 3.5) where talk and discourse are conceived of as a complex system. Discourse analysis covers a range of approaches that emerge from three key understandings of the term discourse.[4] Firstly, that discourse is language above the level of the sentence, and so utterances are considered as component elements contributing to a larger interaction or text. Secondly, analysing discourse means analysing language in use, with the context of each utterance and interaction informing our understanding of it. Finally,

---

[4] It must be noted there are many different definitions of discourse, but there is not the space here to engage in a full discussion of the concept.

discourse is a form of social practice, with patterns structuring knowledge, attitudes, relationships and behaviour.

If we are to properly analyse book talk as situated accounts of reading and understand the role of empathy as social, then discourse analysis is the most appropriate approach. To analyse discourse is to move beyond text or thematic analysis, to consider and foreground interactive and relational components, as well as connecting the moment of interaction with wider social practice and structures.

3.1 Data collection and preparation

Five reading groups were observed and recorded, with discussions transcribed for four groups. [5] Recordings took place at regularly scheduled meetings to capture naturally occurring discourse events. Typically the length of discussion for the groups would be between 60 and 120 minutes, reflected in the recording lengths seen in Table 1 (below); additional time was taken for non-book talk at the start and end of each sessions as members arrived and dispersed.

In attempting to capture naturally occurring discourse, the study aimed for greater ecological validity, meaning the discussions emulated the normal meetings as much as possible to enhance the generalisability of results. I was present as an observer and learned to limit my interaction with the groups.[6] However, the benefits of observing the discussion and being able to make detailed notes to support understanding of the data outweighed the potential impact on the discussion.

The groups can be characterised by how they were set-up and run, as well as their previous book choices – all important elements of book club identity (Long, 2003). This information was gathered

---

[5] Unfortunately, due to issues with the recording, RG5 was not transcribed.
[6] There were occasions where participants directed questions to me but I have not included these sections in the analysis.

through discussion with group leaders and questionnaires provided to individual participants. A summary of the groups can be found in table 1, with further detail provided below:

Reading Group	No. of participants and gender	Age range	Location	Edition read	Length of recording (mins)	Of which transcribed (mins)	Ethnic background	Employment background	Education background
RG1	5 (5 Female)	20-30	House	UK	68:31	50:00	White (British, NZ, USA)	Creatives; Professionals.	Graduates
RG2	9 (2 male) (7 female)	20-80	Foyer of cultural centre	US	59:24	55:00	White (English)	Civil servants; Professionals; Retired.	Graduates
RG3	7 (7 female)	40-70	House	US	84:45	70:00	White (English)	Clerical; Support staff; Retired.	Secondary; Graduates.
RG4	12 (10 female) (2 male)	30-70	Library	UK	96:52	75:00	Mixed (majority English)	Mixed.	Graduates
RG5	13 (13 female)	20-30	House	UK	91:08	N/A	White (English)	Professionals; charity sector.	Graduates; Post- graduates.

Table 1: Overview of reading groups

RG 1: Friendship group. A relatively newly formed group that had been meeting for approximately 6 months. They would discuss the book over dinner with the host taking on loose chairing duties at the start of discussion before informal conversation took over. Meetings occurred every 1-2 months.

RG 2: Franchise of larger, award winning group. RG2 had been meeting for over a year. The members of this group had initially responded to an advert for another larger group. This group now operated autonomously. They met at a local event space. The group leader introduced the book and invited initial responses. Meetings occurred every 2 months.

RG 3: Work/friendship group. They had been meeting for just under a year. The group was a work-related friendship group, with additional invited membership. The group would meet at each other's houses and discuss a book over drinks, before engaging with more general topics. Meetings occurred every 1-2 months.

RG 4: Library-affiliated group. They had been meeting for over 3 years but with shifting membership. They were attached to a local library and run by a member of staff. There was a higher degree of formality in this group, with an introduction by the group leader and set finishing time. Meetings occurred every 2 months.

RG 5: Extended-friendship group. They had been meeting for over a year. Run by one person; open to friends of current members. A host initiated discussion by asking what the group thought, allowing the next speaker to self-select. There was a high-degree of informality, with simultaneous speech often developing into separate discussions. Meetings occurred every 1-3 months.

There are obvious differences between these groups in terms of membership and this did impact on their discussion and appreciation of the book. Highlighting the importance of analysing the data as discourse. RG2 and RG4 took place in institutional settings and the interaction was more formal. They had explicit interactive norms and rituals in how they were run – particularly in the opening and closing of the discussions – and a tighter focus on discussing the book. RG1, RG3 & RG5 allowed for greater digression, potentially due to the increased familiarity of the participants. However, the processes coded and explored in section 4 occurred across the groups.

It is also notable that the majority of the participants were women, something that is reported as typical in the literature on reading groups (cf. Hartley, 2001; Long, 2003). I have to acknowledge this gender-imbalance, but I move away from the gendering of the discourse to analyse patterns and processes that occurred in both mixed-sex and single-sex groups and across participants. Further, the category of positioning (as discussed in section 1.3 and 4.2.2) can incorporate consideration of gender where relevant, if necessary. This is not to say that differences weren't present, with male participants more likely, although not exclusively, to negatively evaluate the book on genre and gendered lines,

describing elements as chick lit or the book as 'light'. However, these become more relevant in analysis of how readers discussed characters as fictional constructs (Author 2016).

3.2 The novel: *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave

The groups were similar in their book-selection criteria and reading habits, opting for titles that were perceived to be high-brow but still accessible. High-recognition authors and prize-winners were highlighted in discussion and on questionnaires. However, there was some variation (both between and within groups). Most noticeable was the fact that members of RG3 were much more open about reading commercial and genre fiction, examples of which were negatively evaluated in the institution-affiliated groups (RG2 & RG4).

Unfortunately, while ecological validity was sought, to allow comparison across groups, the researcher chose the book for discussion. *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave was selected as it was marketed at book clubs and Cleave was a successful award-winning author. The book was also deemed appropriate for its themes of immigration and altruism, which had the potential to engage or limit empathy. Further, while some research operationalises empathy as identification based on similarity, a full account recognises the importance of acknowledging difference. *The Other Hand* is narrated by Sarah and Bee, two characters that represent differing degrees of distance to readers. As such, this book afforded an opportunity to examine potential differences in empathic response. In all cases, the book was ratified by group organisers as appropriate and in-line with normal group selections.

Here follows a brief synopsis of the novel:

While fleeing their village in Nigeria, Little Bee and her sister meet a holidaying English couple, Andrew and Sarah. The girls' pursuers offer to spare their lives if Andrew will cut off his finger; he is unable to but Sarah does. Little Bee is spared but her sister is murdered. Sarah and Andrew are unaware of this

outcome but the meeting further damages their relationship, already affected by Sarah's infidelity and Andrew's depression.

Bee stows away on a ship to England but is discovered and placed in a detention centre. She is held for two years (age 14-16), before being unofficially released. She goes to Sarah and Andrew's house and hides in their garden. She witnesses Andrew die by suicide but, to protect herself, does not intervene. Later, she reveals herself to Sarah. She moves in and provides support for Sarah and her son Charlie.

On a day trip, Charlie gets lost. Despite personal risk, Bee talks to the police, who detain her. Bee is deported, but Sarah goes to Nigeria to protect her and collect the stories of others like her.

3.3 Coding

The data were transcribed (see appendix A for key) into intonation units (DuBois, et al., 1993), which are parts of speech 'spoken under a single intonation contour, with boundaries marked by prosodic changes' (L. Cameron 2010, p.35). As Cameron (2010, pp.34-35) argues, following Chafe (1994, p. 63), intonation units have a psycholinguistic rationale, indicating the speakers focus at each point in the discussion. Further, they can also aid the preparation and analysis of data by providing short, distinct units rather than relying on turns or utterances.

The transcriptions were imported into Atlas.ti to be coded. Initially, anything resembling empathy was coded and then separated into automatic or deliberate categories. This distinction was deemed insufficient to characterise *as if* real talk and so deliberate empathy was further refined into attribution and positioning, as introduced in the literature review. On examination of sections identified, additional codes (stereotyping, mediation and extension) were deemed necessary to understand how readers mobilised information to assess character behaviour. Finally, synechdocal

interpretation was introduced to understand how readers utilised characters to inform consideration of wider real-world groups. These processes are discussed in detail in section 4.

3.4 Ethics

APA guidelines for ethical research practice were followed to ensure consent, anonymity and data security. A written and verbal overview of the data collection process was provided to participants along with opportunity for asking questions.

All readers were over twenty-one-years old and members of groups that selected books dealing with mature topics. However, as *The Other Hand* does include a scene of extreme violence, a group representative was asked to decide if it was suitable. Once copies were distributed it was up to individuals if they wanted to read the book or join the discussion. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their permission until completion of the analysis phase; no such requests were made.

3.5 Discourse Analysis: Dynamic Systems Approach

As discussed, this study adopts a discourse analytic approach to best engage with the data as reading-in-talk. The approach is underpinned by an understanding of complex dynamic systems research in applied linguistics (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) and metaphor (L. Cameron, 2010) which allows consideration of the data as emerging from the immediate context but also within a wider system of literary production and reception. For example, while the focus here is specific reading group discussions, we have to acknowledge that accounts emerge from previous encounters with the text and related discourse.

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron use 'complex, dynamic, non-linear, self-organizing, open, emergent, sometimes chaotic, and adaptive systems' (2008, pp. 25–42) as a metaphor to understand interaction. As a brief overview:

- A system can be understood as a set of components that interact, producing an overall state at a particular time. So, each reading group is a system with shared responses (interpretations, evaluations and similar) viewed as stabilizations within the discussion.

- A complex system is heterogeneous; its elements can be composed of many different types of entities or processes, which in themselves could be considered complex systems. This underpins differences in reception, for example competing positions (as will be seen in section 4.2.2). Each reader is heterogeneous and will bring their own experiences and knowledge to the discussion. Similarly, each group will differ due to the different elements that make up the group.

- Systems are dynamic and always subject to change. This can be seen in the way readers negotiate interpretations responding to contextual and co-textual pressures. By moving away from static understandings of reception we can better represent interaction and enhance our analysis. Empathy, then, becomes something shared, evaluated and contested by the groups through discourse.

In relation to this study: social discourse is an overarching ongoing complex system; reading group discussions are complex systems emerging from and feeding back into this overarching system; in turn, the reading group is made up of individuals, who are also complex systems. How readers talk will be subject to interacting forces and influences emerging from the individual, discussion context and wider discourse.

Cameron (2012, p. 5) provides a useful visualization of a dynamic discourse system in relation to empathy, which is adapted in figure 1: <Insert figure 1>

Level 0 is the initial conditions of the system, which develop as the system changes over time. Levels 1 (automatic) & 2 (deliberate) are the moment-by-moment discourse dynamics of empathy in talk. Level 3 represents changes over the stretch of a discourse event, which can last minutes or hours, and

feedback into the discussion. Level 4 represents stabilisations, where patterns from the other levels have become reinforced enough to potentially influence other interactions.

For this paper, we are focusing on local discourse events (level 1 and 2). However, individual participants engaged in these interactions are always connected to the socio-cultural milieu. The model provides a frame for the investigation of empathy in discourse contexts within a wider system of literary production and reception. Conceptualizing and analyzing the data in terms of a dynamic systems approach best represents the interactive and fluid nature of the discussions. Further it underscores the negotiated aspect of reception and how the different categories identified through coding should not be considered as static artifacts but rather in terms of process and temporary stabilisations within a system.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this section I introduce the processes that characterise *as if* real talk. In illustrating these processes, the readers' talk will be framed as gossip involving the negotiation of personal experience and social expectations.

I start by introducing an example of automatic empathy, before focussing on attribution and positioning as the key elements of deliberate empathy. Stereotyping, extension and mediation will then be discussed, representing variations on positioning using different real-world and textual knowledge. Finally, synechdocal interpretation (Harrison, 2008) is introduced, highlighting text-to-life movement where reading can influence attitudes to real life groups. Each process will be illustrated through analysis of extracts of the text.

4.1 AUTOMATIC EMPATHY

Automatic empathy is the mirroring of physical or emotional responses based on a recognition of shared humanity. As such, automatic empathic responses represent evidence of readers talking about characters *as if* they were real. However, there were limited numbers of explicit examples of automatic

empathy in the data across all groups. The majority of displays of emotion were sympathetic responses, triggered by characters' emotions without replicating them. Extract 1 provides an example of both sympathetic emotion (l.672) and automatic empathy (l.681). It is taken from RG1's discussion of Andrew's and Sarah's contrasting willingness to cut off a finger to save another's life:

Extract 1 *RG 1:* Automatic empathy

670   NZ   [I understood] Andrew,

671   NZ   but [also,

672   NZ   I was angry at him.]

...

677   NZ   for not doing it,

678   NZ   I was really angry at him.

679   NZ   and then she did it,

680   NZ   and you were like,

681   NZ   ((DRAWN OUT INHILATION))

682   NZ   I I understood how that could like,

683   NZ   just unravel your,

684   NZ   [relationship,

In l.670, NZ claims to 'understand' Andrew, but this is balanced against a sympathetic response of anger (l.671 and ll.677-678) to his behaviour. Then in l.681 when discussing cutting off a finger, NZ swiftly inhales and pulls her hand away as if avoiding a descending knife. This motion in response to another's experience is mirrored kinesthetic striving – automatic empathy as conceived by Lipps (Jahoda, 2005). However, NZ does not mirror the action precisely. To make sense of the variation, we can follow Stein's understanding of empathy as non-primordial experience. By pulling her hand out of the way, NZ follows a behaviour pattern similar to Sarah's, but mixes the experiences of the characters

with her own subjective desire to dodge the blade. In doing so, she gains insight into the motivation of the characters based on a reflection of her own hypothetical behaviour and so revaluates Andrew's actions. This highlights the dynamic nature of the discussion, where evaluation of character shifts over a few units of talk as speaker provides an account of their response.

This extract illustrates how automatic empathy provides an avenue for connection across difference. The readers, having never been in such a situation, respond by imagining themselves into the characters' situation. Further, it can be understood as gossip, as the character's behaviour is being discussed and evaluated. Combined, these elements form one aspect of *as if* real talk: fictional behaviour becomes a felt empathic response which is used to assign praise or blame as if the character were a non-present community member.

Evidence of automatic empathy was rare in the reading groups, potentially due to the post-hoc nature of book club discussions. While the discussions provide accounts of reading, they do lack the immediacy of the initial encounter with the novel, and so potentially readers are less likely to perform automatic empathy. At this point in the ongoing system of literary reception, the readers' accounts are more likely to involve considered responses to the text. The experimental paradigm of reader-response work (e.g., Hakemulder, 2000) might be more suitable for tracking automatic empathy in readers, as it employs methods and tools (such as eye-tracking and EEG machines) that can measure physical responses to personal reading.

4.2 DELIBERATE EMPATHY: ATTRIBUTION AND POSITIONING

As discussed in section 1.3, empathy often involves a deliberate choice, even conscious effort, to transcend differences. This section will illustrate how deliberate empathy is performed in reader talk drawing on the concepts of attribution and positioning. It was found that readers attributed motivation,

emotion and other psychological aspects onto characters. These attributions were used to evaluate behaviour based on how characters were positioned. Readers draw on their knowledge and expectations of human psychology and social norms to mobilise attributions and positions, gossiping about the characters *as if* they were real.

4.2.1 Attribution

Palmer (2004, 2007) used the concept of attribution to explain how people ascribe causal motivation to behaviour when interpreting literary texts. Palmer argues that readers use 'pre-stored knowledge of other minds in the actual world in order to process the emergent knowledge that is supplied by fictional-mind presentations.' (2004, p. 175) Due to the necessarily incomplete nature of fictional minds, readers rely on cognitive structures that inform behavioural expectation to fill in gaps in the story world and allow the reader to construct continuously conscious minds from the text (Palmer, 2004, p. 176). While Palmer was concerned with solo reading, attribution can be seen to be a key component of reading-in-talk with readers engaging in shared and competing attributions to discuss characters.

Extract 2, taken from RG3, provides a typical example of attribution: the reader explores character behaviour by suggesting motivating emotions and/or psychological states. Prior to the extract, the participants have been debating Bee's age. To question the current interpretation, BM introduces discussion of Bee's behaviour and treatment in detention:

Extract 2 RG3: Attribution

0166   BM: but to be in,

0167   BM: a detention centre,

0168   BM: as well,

0169   BM: with adults.

0170   BM: *I don't know whether they,*

0171   BM: *obviously mixed them up,*

0172   BM: *cause sh-*

0173   BM: *I mean,*

0174   BM: *cause she said that she,*

0175   BM: *put bandages round herself,*

0176   BM: *didn't she?*

0177   BM: *[to keep her chest in.]*

0178   *[((GROUP AGREEMENT))   ]*

0179   DB: *[to make her look young]*

0180   BM: *[to make her] look [young,]*

0181   DI: *[yes.]*

0182   BM: *and [more-*

0183   DB: *[and more boyish,]*

0184   BM: *[and not that like-*

0185   QZ: *[boyish,*

0186   QZ: *and younger]*

0187   *[((GROUP AGREEMENT))   ]*

0188   BM: *so clearly there was a,*

0189   BM: *an element of,*

0190   BM: *you know..-*

0191   BM: *well she was uncomfortable there,*

0192   BM: *with with,*

0193   BM: *with men.*

0194   BM: *um-*

0195   DI: [aware of her own,

0196   DI: sexuality]

The basic form of attribution can be characterised by the following sequence of components: plot event, character behaviour, attribution of emotional/psychological state. In extract 2, the plot event is Bee's detention (ll.0166-0167) and the item of behaviour is the tying of a bandage around her chest (l.0175). BM comments on this behaviour, using it as evidence for an underlying emotional state in l.0190, where Bee is described as uncomfortable. DI supports and extends this interpretation by suggesting a psychological state, being aware of her own sexuality (ll.0195-0196), that provides the motivation both for the emotion and behaviour it triggers. By affording Bee an underlying psychology to explain her behaviour, readers talk about a fictional character *as if* they were real.

This topic of discussion was seen across the groups, who all assess Bee's behaviour in relation to her age, alongside other features such language ability. It provides a simple discreet example of attribution, but examinations of behaviour and speculation on motivation can occur over long stretches of talk, taking in multiple attributions on single or combinations of event-behaviour pairings. Through multiple attributions, readers build a dynamic and complicated conception of character, providing evidence that they talk about characters *as if* they were real, and not just through reductive characterisations.

4.2.2 Positioning

Attribution provides the basic process for *as if* real talk. However, other factors influence how attribution is performed. In extract 2, attribution emerges from a negotiation of social identity: Bee's age. To account for elements of social identity, I adopt the concept of positioning. As discussed in section 1.3, positions emerge in the discourse to create 'cluster[s] of short-term disputable rights,

obligations and duties' (Harré, 2012, p. 193) based on social identity. Treating the interactions as dynamic systems, these positional norms shift as the discussion progresses and are dependent on context at each level of the system, for example individual understanding of a position might differ from the overall group consensus and wider social expectations.

To illustrate this, we can return to extract 2. Preceding the extract, the readers engage in a negotiation of Bee's age using textual evidence to position her as an adult and then a child. BM uses details, such as Bee being put in a detention centre with adults (ll.0167-0169) and making herself look younger (ll.0179-0180), to position Bee as someone who has reached a degree of sexual maturity. This positioning emerges from both textual detail – recalling that Bee was placed in adult detention – but also the readers understanding or extrapolation of what it is to be a teenage girl in an intimidating environment. For this reader, who is a mother and has experience of being a teenage girl, Bee is deemed to be behaving in an understandable way, based on how she has been positioned and the suggested attribution. This can be contrasted with an older male reader from RG2 who expressed doubt over Bee's behaviour in detention. These two readers had very different initial conditions, as well as RG2 being generally more focussed on (and critical of) characterisation.

There is an interactive relationship between attribution and positioning: while a character may be positioned without attribution, for example through labelling, positioning will shift with attribution in the flow of discourse. Both elements feed into subsequent accounts and negotiated interpretations, which is expected given that a feature of reading group discourse is argumentation and collaboration (O'Halloran, 2011). Extract 2 provides an example of attribution supporting a position, but attributions can conflict with a positioning, as in Extract 3, illustrating how attributions and positioning are negotiated in discussion. (This highlights why it is useful to conceptualise the interactions as dynamic systems with these elements treated as processes rather than fixed items.)

Extract 3 follows Extract 2, with the readers building on the positioning of Bee as a young adult who has suffered trauma. It provides a more explicit example of how readers use social knowledge in their assessment of characters by highlighting a contradiction between Bee's behaviour and what is considered normal, resulting in attribution being used in a comparative rather than supportive manner:

Extract 3 RG 3: Positioning

0573   QZ: *with what she'd gone through,*

0574   QZ: *being in a detention centre*

0575   DB: *[yeah.]*

0576   QZ: *[you wo]uld have [thought,]*

0577   CA: *[well she-]*

0578   QZ: *at some point,*

0579   QZ: *some-*

0580   QZ: *that that .. tragic part,*

0581   QZ: *would have been blocked [out,]*

0582   BM: *[yes.]*

0583   QZ: *which would   [normally happen,*

0584   QZ: *to a child.*

0585   QZ: *but she-]*

0586   BM: *[but she came and,*

0587   BM: *sort of,*

0588   BM   *picked the] scab,*

0589   BM: *[didn't she?]*

0590   HE: *[mmm.]*

0591   QZ: *[yeah.]*

0592   QZ: *she she,*

25

0593	QZ:	*It was like,*
0594	QZ:	*she didn't want to let,*
0595	QZ:	*something go,*
0596	QZ:	*and I don't know what-*
0597	BM:	*mmm.*
0598	QZ:	*I still couldn't work out,*
0599	QZ:	*at the end of it,*
0600	QZ:	*what she was expecting,*
0601	QZ:	*[from] them.*

QZ begins by referencing Bee's placement in detention. She uses the metaphor 'gone through' (l.0573) to indicate the hardship experienced and attribution is made to psychological behaviour, picking a metaphorical scab (l.0588), which runs counter to the expected behaviour of a child (l.0583-0584). The discussion of Bee's behaviour could be construed in terms of 'script formulations' (Edwards, 1997), where a script for behaviour is developed in the discourse and used as a subsequent measure of behaviour by the speakers. Bee's experiences lead to an expectation of behaviour which is not fulfilled for QZ. Instead she sets up a conditional scenario, indicated and reinforced by the use of the modal 'would' (l. 0576, 0581 & 0583), and performs attribution through comparison with a hypothetical, socially normal child. Bee is being gossiped about by QZ, who evaluates her behaviour and positions her as not 'normal'; Bee should behave in a way that conforms to the position of a child who has suffered emotional trauma (l.0581-0584) but does not.

Attribution and positioning underpin how readers empathise and gossip about characters, and so talk about them *as if* real. It is important to note that even when attribution is contradictory or unsuccessful, the fact that it is attempted at all, indicates that the character exists, even temporarily, as someone to be empathised with. Even if their behaviour is deviant, if it is discussed in psychological rather than

fictional terms, then they are being talked about *as if* they were real. (It must be noted that sometimes it does lead to the foregrounding of fictionality (see Author 2016)). The combination of positioning and attribution means that readers consider fictional characters in terms of human behaviour and real-world social categories.

In summary, positioning is the process of dynamic socio-cultural categorisation that readers mobilise during talk. It operates in tandem with attribution which emerges from and/or contributes to how a character is positioned. Through positioning, readers are able to compare characters against idealised or expected versions of behaviour, in essence gossiping about the characters.

4.3 Stereotyping, Extension and Mediation

Three further processes were identified in the analysis of the data that impacted on how deliberate empathy was performed.

4.3.1 Stereotyping

Much of what happens in the novel involves characters that are far from most readers' experience. Therefore, the accuracy or specificity of knowledge used for positioning is variable, and can result in attribution based on generalities or misinformation. In such cases, the full scope of attribution is curtailed through over-simplistic assertions of group behaviours and psychology which ignore the particularities of the individual situation. We might consider this stereotyping, where 'those in the out-group become dehumanized and come to represent mere categories' (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 567). This is exemplified in extract 4, which provides a further account of Bee's behaviour after leaving the detention centre:

Extract 4 R3: Stereotyping

0612   UI: [but ultimate]ly,

0613   UI: she was a survivor though,

0614   UI: *wasn't she?*

0615   UI: *I mean Africans,*

0616   UI: *are surv[ivors.]*

0617   BM: *[yes].*

0618   UI: *they live under,*

0619   UI: *very [difficult condition.,]*

0620   BM: *[but I I-]*

0621   UI: *they they.you know,*

0622   UI: *will do anything.*

In extract 4, the attribution process can be described as follows: event (difficult conditions), behaviour (doing anything), attribution (the will to survive). It also illustrates a dynamic shift in positioning: first, as a survivor (l.0613), rather than as a young woman (extract 3); and subsequently as an African (l.0615).

This extract again illustrates the impact of differences in system conditions, with UI providing a unique interpretation drawing on knowledge of living in South Africa. As Peplow observed, readers '[draw] on facets of personal identity to ratchet up the credibility of their interpretation' (2011, p. 302), and here UI orientates herself as an expert in l.0612 which allows her to present her account as primary. The use of 'ultimately' (l. 0612) has the discursive function of dismissing the previous accounts and defining Bee's behaviour through her positioning as a 'survivor' (l.0613)

However, this is problematic. By expanding the position of survivor to encompass all Africans, UI places Bee in a group so broad that it undercuts the nuances of her experiences. It allows UI to quickly summarise first the situation of all Africans (ll.618-619) and use this to make a judgement of their behaviour (l.0622). While the behaviour remains plausible and moderately praised due

28

to the 'difficult conditions', both the form and content detract from consideration of Bee's individual experience as seen in extracts 2 and 3.

Stereotyping was more common in the data when readers had some, but limited, experience of the groups they were discussing. For example, in RG1 a participant had worked with Nigerians in a legal capacity and felt able to make negative generalisations based on this experience.

Ultimately, while stereotypes negatively detract from a nuanced and individual understanding of character, they remain a form of *as if* real talk by relating the character to existing perceptions of social and cultural groups, however reductive.

4.3.2 Extension

When readers perform attribution or positioning, they utilise their own understanding of psychology and social identity in tandem with information from text. However, there are instances where readers add features to the textual world. I have termed this 'extension', and it reveals how readers blur real-world knowledge and textual detail to support their interpretations. Like world/life correspondences found by Eriksson & Aronsson (2004), extensions operate in a feedback loop, both informing and being informed by the text – adopting a dynamic systems approach accounts for this type of interactive behaviour. Extract 5 shows how positioning and extension are used to support two competing, but not mutually exclusive, interpretations of Bee's ability to deal effectively and compassionately with Charlie:

Extract 5 RG 3: Extension

2559   QZ: [and I thought] that was quite-

2560   QZ: very bright of her,

....

2577   DB: but if you think in the village though,

2578	DB:	*I would imagine that they,*
2579	DB:	*the older children,*
2580	DB:	*looked after the younger children.*
2581	BM:	*ye[s.]*
2582	DB:	*[ye]s.*
2583	DB:	*[so] she kind of,*
2584	DB:	*had a fairly good knowledge [of,]*
2585	DI:	*[mm.]*
2586	BM:	*[yeah.]*
2588	BM:	*the Xlittle onesX.*
2589	DB:	*[and how to act,*
2590	DB:	*to children.]*

Initially, QZ positions Bee as someone 'bright' (l.2561) to explain her behaviour. However, DB then presents a conditional scenario (starting l.2577) that counters QZ's positive assessment of Bee. Bee is positioned as an older child with attendant social responsibilities. DB speculates on a history beyond the chronological and geographical confines of the text, to produce an imagined account of behaviour (l2578-2580). This is positioning involving extension.

In Text World Theory (Gavins, 2007), it is proposed that readers treat literary worlds as rich worlds, enhancing textual details with knowledge of their own world, similar to Palmer's understanding of attribution where the reader fleshes out fiction in order to understand character. As such, extension highlights readers' ability to not only discuss characters but also the textual worlds they inhabit *as if* they were real

4.3.3 Mediation

I introduce the term mediation, meaning an intervention in a process or relationship, to describe when attribution and/or positioning is performed through another's perspective. In the data, readers were found to adopt other perspectives to discuss and evaluate characters' behaviour.

Mediation tended to occur when readers were evaluating the morality of behaviour. In the data, this centred on the discussion of character relationships or events involving difficult choices, such as Sarah and Andrew's willingness to help Bee (extract 6). Readers monitored the attitudes and relationships between characters, and filtered their own understanding and assessments through other, and sometimes multiple other, perspectives, as illustrated in Extract 6:

Extract 6 RG 3: Mediation

0836   DB: *I did think that,*

0837   DB: *how would [you feel,*

0838   BM: *[how would you feel?*

0839   DB: *if you were put,*

0840   DB: *in that position?]*

0841   UI: *[well I think,*

0842   UI: *I think,*

0843   UI: *he probably made,]*

0845   UI: *a decision,*

0846   BM: *yes.*

0847   UI: *that the vast,*

0848   UI: *majority [would have done.]*

0849   BM: *[and he was still-]*

0850   BM: [yes.]

0851   [((GROUP AGREEMENT))]

0852   BM: [he was still] thinking,

0853   BM: very lo[gically,]

0854   [((GROUP AGREEMENT))]

0855   BM: and very Westernised.

0856   BM: <Qand this just [doesn't happen.Q>]

0857   DI: <Q[th- this is ridiculous,]

0858   HE: [yes.]

0859   DI: [ridiculously stupid,

0860   DI: do you know,

0861   DI: who I am?Q>]

0862   DB: [<Q just pay them off,

0863   DB: pay them off.Q>]

0864   BM: [<Qgo away.Q>]

0865   BM: yes.]

0866   HE: mmm.]

0867   QZ: [And they] were [strangers,]

...

0870   QZ: [you] know,

0871   QZ: to any .. tourist,

0872   QZ: they were [just,]

0873   HI: [yeah.]

0874   QZ: two African girls,

0875   QZ: who .. you know-

0876   QZ: *they don't know anything about them.*

0877   QZ: *they [don't know who they were,*

0878   QZ: *they could have,*

0879   QZ: *you know-]*

0880   BM: *[It could have been a whole,*

0881   BM: *sort of scam,]*

0882   BM: *[that …*

0883   BM: *you know?]*

0884   QZ: *[so you can-*

0885   QZ: *it's understandable,*

…

0906   DB: *and she could have seen it,*

0907   DB: *from her mother's point of view,*

0908   DB: *and just seen these,*

0909   DB: *two desperate girls.*

As in previous extracts, readers engage in attribution and positioning. However, here, they use positions for Bee that emerge from Andrew's (scammers: ll.0841-0883) and Sarah's (desperate girls: ll.0906-0909) perspectives. These positions are themselves generated through the positioning of Andrew as a westerner (l.0855) and tourist (l.0871) and Sarah as a mother (l.0907).

Andrew is positioned using categories that enable the reader to align with his stance – and so use Andrew as a surrogate to explore their own attitudes and response to the situation. This is potentially controversial as Andrew's positioning of Bee as a scammer is faulty and arguably shows a lack of compassion. As such, the connection between readers and character is performed gradually. UI begins the process but qualifies her account with epistemic modals: 'think' (l. 0842),

and 'probably' (l. 0843) and she also does not explicitly include herself in the 'majority' (l. 0847-48). The use of the modal 'would' in l.0848 creates a hypothetical scenario where others are put in Andrew's position and behave similarly, and so his behaviour is considered comparable to the typical social norm.

While UI remains external to Andrew by describing his decision, BM engages in a series of positional shifts that move her closer to Andrew. Firstly, on l.0852, BM describes Andrew's thinking as logical and then as 'Westernised' (l.0855). QZ refines Westerners to tourists (l.0867), changing the criteria of judgement and positioning the characters within a group shared by the readers; the plot event becomes something they might experience. [7]

QZ's use of the word 'just' on l. 0872, denigrates the position of the 'two African girls', lowering their status and providing mitigation for the withholding of help. As the girls are strangers, and further, African strangers, from the perspective of a tourist their actions can be interpreted as a scam. The reader, through mediation, negatively evaluates the girls' behaviour. By positioning the girls as con-artists, any lack of action – by character or reader – is rendered understandable. Inaction, which might be considered blameworthy, as it ignores the plight of another, especially given the readers' privileged knowledge, is considered praise worthy and justifiable.

Support for UI's interpretation is continued by the group, representing a stabilisation in the system, until l.0906, when DB introduces a counter perspective. DB positions Sarah as a mother leading to a different interpretation of events, where the sisters are re-positioned as girls with an attributed emotional state explaining their behaviour, rather than a scam.

Competing accounts provide evidence of how readers discuss characters from multiple perspectives, affording understanding of disparate attitudes that may not be complementary. This

---

[7] Members of RG3 went on to provide examples of their own negative experiences as tourists.

affords a complicated understanding of character behaviour and psychology, beyond binary morality, that takes into account the different attitudes, experiences and perspectives of others. Gossip about characters' behaviour in complex moral situations allows the reader to examine and justify multiple courses of action and behaviour through attribution and positioning, as well as consider their own attitudes, akin to self-interrogation observed by Long (2003).

Extract 6 is an illustrative example of mediation, but similar discussions occurred in all the reading groups with variation in evaluation of character behaviour.

4.4 SYNECHDOCAL INTERPRETATION

So far, I have discussed how readers gossip about characters using personal experience and social knowledge alongside textual details. However, there was evidence in the data of character behaviour influencing discussion of real-world social groups. Such shifts from individual characters to wider social groups are evidence of synechdocal interpretation (Harrison, 2008) where readers empathise with individual fictional characters whilst placing them in a metonymic relationship with real-world social groups. Eriksson and Aronsson (2005, p. 734) observe a similar strategy being adopted by teachers leading book talk discussions, who drew 'a generic case about the whole continent of Africa from an isolated fictional case' and argue for its importance in expanding empathy to encompass wider groups.

Synechdocal interpretation can be observed in Extract 7. Occurring after extract 2, it shifts discussion from the attribution of Bee's psychological processes, to a more general consideration of detention centres and young women in them:

Extract 7 RG 3: Synechdocal interpretation

0200   QZ: It ma[de you think,

…

0204   QZ: *more about the detention centres,]*

0205   QZ: *and those sort of,*

0206   QZ: *en[vironments,]*

0207   HI: *[mmmmm.]*

0208   QZ: *didn't it?*

...

0212   QZ: *and how they,*

0213   QZ: *how they-*

0214   QZ: *how she described,*

0215   QZ: *it in the book.*

0216   QZ: *(as if) describing it,*

0217   QZ: *without too much detail,*

0218   DB: *[yeah.]*

0219   QZ: *[of wh]at went on.*

0220   QZ: *but you got the idea that,*

0221   DB: *[mmm.]*

0222   QZ: *[that it] wasn't a,*

0223   DB: *[nice place]*

0224   QZ: *[nice place,]*

0225   QZ: *for young women,*

The pluralisation of detention centres (l.204), and subsequent generalisation to related environments (ll.205-206) highlights the shift in focus to the real world. Importantly, the illusion that this information is coming from a character rather than an author (ll.213-214) strengthens the affordance of *as if* real talk, and Bee being treated as an accurate, if not actual, representative of the social group. A discussion of Bee's particular experience informs a more general

consideration of other young women (l. 225). Understanding of detained young female asylum seekers has been altered through an increase of knowledge derived from Bee's situation and the attribution of her psychological state seen in Extract 2. Synechdocal interpretation between Bee and asylum seekers occurred in every group and represents another strand of *as if* real talk. It demonstrates how changes in the system of the reading group discussion connects to and, potentially, influences the wider discourse on immigration and asylum seekers.

5 DISCUSSION

It was found that readers used attribution and positioning to evaluate character behaviour against their own personal experience and social norms, in essence, gossiping about them. This extends previous research into book group discourse by providing linguistic evidence for gossip and a systematic framework to understand *as if* real talk. For these reading groups, deliberate empathy (attribution and positioning) was the underlying process contributing to *as if* real talk and I would expect to these to occur in other reading group discussions. However, further sub-categories were required to fully account for what the readers were doing. Stereotyping, mediation and extension – variations on positioning – require further investigation in different interactions to understand how generalisable they are. Arguably, they may be more prevalent in books, like *The Other Hand,* that prompt consideration of different social groups and evaluation of behaviour. Similarly, synechdocal interpretation might be said to be primed by the topic of this book. However, the research does provide empirical evidence for synechdocal interpretation, a process that has potential to underpin future research into how prosocial behaviour might emerge from book talk.

Empathy-related processes were found across the groups, but this does not mean that there was uniformity in response. The types of positions and what was considered their entailments differed according to system conditions. So, for example, middle-aged female participants were more likely to

align to interpretations based on the positioning of Sarah as a mother. This indicates how the framework could be used to understand variation in literary reception – although this is not the focus of the current research, which has sought to establish categories.

There are additional limitations to the study. Ecological validity was sought but impeded through observation and enforced book selection. Further, generalisability of findings will need additional testing, particularly away from the homogenous membership of reading groups, which are predominantly white, middle-class and female (Hartley, 2001). In my data, there was limited variation in terms of gender and even less so in relation to ethnicity, with only two BAME readers (both in RG4). While this enables the examination of empathy across differences (Chabot Davis, 2008), and there is an argument for universality in Bloom's (2010) evolutionary connection between gossip and narrative, it must be acknowledged that communities may differ in how they engage with fictional characters and in their norms of discussion. Further research focussing on: reading groups with different memberships; different types of reading environments; and other methods of analysing reading-in-talk is necessary. Equally, application of the categories to discussions of books dealing with different topics, especially ones with less potential to activate empathy, would extend the generalisability of findings.

As Myer's (2009) argues, reading-in-talk is an ongoing process. While a reading group is an important site of discussion, it needs to be considered in terms of the wider discourse. This study is limited in that it only accounts for one reading even and so *as if* real talk only indicates empathy during the event. However, a dynamic systems approach enables consideration of multiple discourse events over time and how they interact. It provides a potential new method for engaging with literary texts using discourse analysis. This is something Dixon and Bortulussi (2011) highlight is missing from the empirical study of literature: the rigorous application of complex systems theory. In adopting dynamic systems as a metaphor for literary reception, this paper suggests how this might be achieved.

Importantly, this essay contributes to the body of research that highlights the importance of reading groups in personal and social development. *As if* real talk becomes a means for readers to explore and ratify their own positions, attitudes and hypothetical behaviours. In this way, by analysing reading-in-talk, we find evidence for Valentino's assertion that novels are 'ethical testing grounds (2005, p. 16). Further, evidence of synechdocal interpretation shows how discussion of fictional characters can potentially influence understanding and attitudes towards real-world social groups.

6 SUMMARY

Through an analysis of reading group discourse, this article provides clarification to the idea that readers talk about fictional characters *as if* they were real. It draws on dynamic systems, to underpin its method of discourse analysis and inform an understanding of literary reception. It builds on research from cognitive poetics in order to develop the concept of attribution to relate to actual readers. It applies positioning theory and synechdocal interpretation to analyse empathy as a socially-bound process.

By framing this type of talk as gossip, we can understand how readers make connections between the text and their personal and social experience. This leads to an affordance to discuss characters as non-present community members, key in Elias' (1974) understanding of gossip. Ultimately, it was found that readers gossip about characters, assessing their behavior against social norms. This was done through a variety of empathy-related processes, which can be complementary or contradictory in the dynamic flow of discourse. The processes occur in response to the discussion of textual details, extensions of the text, social knowledge/expectations and personal experience, resulting in understandings of character ranging from complex individuality to simplistic overgeneralisations and stereotyping. Reader discourse can also operate in a text-to-world direction through synechdocal interpretation, providing further evidence of the connections readers make between fictional entities

and real-world counterparts. Combined, these processes show how readers talk about characters *as if* they were real.

Please access final version here: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101503

Allington, D. (2011). "It actually painted a picture of the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea": Reading groups, cultural legitimacy, and description in narrative. *Language and Literature*, *20*(4), 317–333.

Allington, D., & Benwell, B. (2012). Reading the reading experience: An ethnomethodological approach to "booktalk." In A. Lang (Ed.), *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century.* (pp. 217–233). University of Massachusetts Press.

Batson, C. D. (2009). These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena. In J. Decety & W. Ickes (Eds.), *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (pp. 3–16). The MIT Press.

Benwell, B. (2009). "A Pathetic and Racist and Awful Character": Ethnomethodological Approaches to the Reception of Diasporic Fiction. *Language and Literature*, *18*(3), 300–316.

Bloom, P. (2010). *How pleasure works: The new science of why we like what we like*. Vintage.

Boler, M. (1997). The risks of empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's gaze. *Cultural Studies*, *11*(2), 253–273.

Burwell, C. (2007). Reading Lolita in times of war: Women's book clubs and the politics of reception. *Intercultural Education*, *18*(4), 281–296.

Cameron, D. (1998). Performing gender identity: Young men's talk and the construction of heterosexual masculinity. In J. Coates (Ed.), *Language and gender: A reader* (pp. 270–284). Blackwell.

Cameron, L. (2010). *Metaphor and Reconciliation: The discourse dynamics of empathy in post-conflict conversations*. Routledge.

Cameron, L. (2012). *The model of empathy dynamics*. http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/livingwithuncertainty/

Chabot Davis, K. (2004). Oprah's Book Club and the politics of cross-racial empathy. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *7*(4), 399–419.

Chabot Davis, K. (2008). White Book Clubs and African American Literature. *Literature Interpretation Theory*, *19*, 155–186.

Chafe, W. (1994). *Discourse, consciousness, and time*. Chicago University Press.

Coates, J. (1998). Gossip revisited: Language in all-female groups. In J. Coates (Ed.), *Language and gender: A reader* (pp. 226–253). Blackwell.

Danziger, N., Faillenot, I., & Peyron, R. (2009). Can we share pain we never felt? Neural correlates of empathy in patients with congenital insensitivity to pain. *Neuron*, *61*, 203–212.

deWaal, F. B. M. (2008). Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *59*, 279–300.

di Pellegrino, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., & Rizzolatti, G. (1992). Understanding motor events: A neurophysiological study. *Experimental Brain Research*, *91*, 176–180.

Dixon, P., & Bortolussi, M. (2011). The Scientific Study of Literature: What Can, Has, and Should be Done. *Scientific Study of Literature*, *1*(2), 59–71.

DuBois, J. W., Schuetze-Coburn, S., Cumming, S., & Paolino, D. (1993). Outline of discourse transcription. In J. Edwards & M. Lampert (Eds.), *Talking data: Transcription and coding in discourse research* (pp. 45–89). Erlbaum.

Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and Cognition*. Sage.

Elias, N. (1974). Towards a Theory of Communities. In C. Bell & H. Newby (Eds.), *The Sociology of Community: A Selection of Readings* (pp. ix–xli). Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.

Elias, N., & Scotson, J. L. (1974). Cohesion, Conflict and Community Character. In C. Bell & H. Newby (Eds.), *The sociology of community: A selection of readings* (pp. 27–38). Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.

Eriksson, K., & Aronsson, K. (2004). Building life world connections during school booktalk. *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research*, *48*(5), 511–518.

Eriksson, K., & Aronsson, K. (2005). "We're really lucky": Co-creating "us" and the "Other" in school booktalk. *Discourse and Society*, *16*, 719–738.

Feather, J. (2007). The British Book Market 1600-1800. In *A companion to the History of the Book* (pp. 232–246). Blackwell.

Fuller, D. (2008). Reading as Social Practice: The Beyond the Book research project. *Journal of Popular Narrative Media*, *1*(2), 211–217.

Fuller, D., & Procter, J. (2009). Reading as "social glue"? Book Groups, Multiculture, and the Small Island Read 2007. *Moving Worlds: Journal of Transcultural Writings*, *9.2*(26–40).

Galinksy, A. D., Maddux, W. W., Gilin, D., & White, J. B. (2008). Why it pays to get inside the head of your opponent: The differential effects of perspective taking and empathy in negotiations. *Pyschological Science*, *19*, 378–381.

Gallese, V., & Goldman, A. (1998). Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mind-reading. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *2*, 493–501.

Gavins, J. (2007). *Text World Theory: An Introduction.* Edinburgh University Press.

Gutjahr, P. (2002). No Longer Left Behind: Amazon.com, Reader Response, and the Changing Fortunes of the Christian Novel in America. *Book History*, *5*, 209–236.

Hakemulder, J. (2000). *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments examining the effects of reading literature on social perception and moral self-concept*. John Benjamins.

Halpern, J., & Weinstein, H. (2004). Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconcilliation. *Human Rights Quarterly*, *26*(3), 561–583.

Harré, R. (2012). Positioning theory: Moral dimensions of social-cultural psychology. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 191–206). Oxford University Press.

Harré, R., & Langenhove, L. (1991). Varieties of positioning. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *21*(4), 393–407.

Harré, R., Moghaddam, F. M., Cairnie, T. P., Rothbart, D., & Sabat, S. R. (2009). Recent Advances in Positioning Theory. *Theory & Psychology*, *19*(1), 5–31.

Harrison, M.C. (2008). The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dicken's Realism. *Narrative*, *16*(3), 256–278.

Hartley, J. (2001). *Reading groups: A survey conducted in association with Sarah Turvey*. Oxford University Press.

Hermes, J. (1995). *Reading women's magazines: An analysis of everyday media use*. Polity.

Hume, D. (2004). *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Penguin.

Hunt, R. (2000). Reading reader, reading readers. *Reader*, *43*, 47–51.

Iser, W. (1974). *The implied reader: Patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jahoda, G. (2005). Theodor Lipps and the shift from "sympathy" to "empathy." *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, *41*(2), 151–163.

Jauss, H. (1970). Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory. *New Literary History*, *2*(1), 7–37.

Kappel, J. W. (1948). Book Clubs and the Evaluation of Books. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *12*(2), 243–252.

Keen, S. (2007). *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford University Press.

Kidd, D. C., & Castano, E. (2013). Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind. *Science*, *342*, 377–380.

Kilner, J., & Lemon, R. (2013). What we know currently about mirror neurons. *Current Biology*, *23*, R1057–R1062.

Koopman, E. M., & Hakemulder, F. (2015). Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection: A Theoretical-Empirical Framework. *Journal of Literary Theory*, *9*(1), 79–111.

Lamb, M. (2005). The "Talking Life" of Books: Women Readers in Oprah's Book Club. In J. Phegley & J. Badia (Eds.), *Reading women: Literary figures and cultural icons from the Victorian age to the present* (pp. 255–280). University of Toronto Press.

Lang, A. (2009). Reading race in Small Island: Discourse deviation, schemata and the textual encounter. *Language and Literature*, *18*, 316–330.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Long, E. (1986). Women, Reading, and Cultural Authority: Some Implications of the Audience Perspective in Cultural Studies. *American Quarterly*, *48*(4), 591–612.

Long, E. (1987). Reading groups and the postmodern crisis of cultural authority. *Cultural Studies*, *1*(3), 307–329.

Long, E. (1992). Textual Interpretation as Collective Action. *Discourse*, *14*(3), 104–130.

Long, E. (2003). *Book clubs: Women and the uses of reading in everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.

Mar, R. A., & Oatley, K. (2008). The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience. *Pesrpectives on Pscyhological Science*, *3*(3), 173–192.

Miall, D. S. (2008). Foregrounding and Feeling in Response to Narrative. In S. Zyngier, M. Bortolussi, A. Chesnokova, & J. Auracher (Eds.), *Directions in empirical literary studies* (pp. 131–144). John Benjamins.

Montag, C., Gallinat, J., & Heinz, A. (2008). Theodor Lipps and the Concept of Empathy: 1851-1914. *Am J Psychiatry*, *165*(10), 1261.

Morson, G., & Emerson, C. (1990). *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a prosaics*. Stanford University Press.

Myers, G. (2009). Stylistics and "reading-in-talk." *Language and Literature*, *18*(3), 338–344.

O'Halloran, K. (2011). Investigating Argumentation in Reading Groups: Combining Manual Qualitative Coding and Automated Corpus Analysis Tools. *Applied Linguistics*, *32*(2), 172–196.

Palmer, A. (2002). The Construction of Fiction Minds. *Narrative*, *10*(1), 28–46.

Palmer, A. (2004). *Fictional Minds*. The University of Nebraska.

Palmer, A. (2007). Attribution Theory: Action and Emotion in Dickens and Pynchon. In M. Lambrou & P. Stockwell (Eds.), *Contemporary Stylistics* (pp. 122–132). Continuum.

Palmer, A. (2009). Attributions of Madness in Ian McEwan's Enduring Love. *Style*, *43*(3), 291–308.

Pedersen, R. (2008). Empathy: A wolf in sheep's clothing? *Medical Health Care Philosophy*, *11*(3), 325–335.

Peplow, D. (2011). "Oh, I've known a lot of Irish people": Reading groups and the negotiation of literary interpretation. *Language and Literature*, *20*(4), 295–315.

Poole, M. (2003). The Women's Chapter: Women's Reading Groups in Victoria. *Feminist Media Studies*, *3*(3).

Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. University of North Carolina Press.

Richards, I. A. (1929). *Practical Criticism. A study of literary judgment*. Kegan Paul & Co.

Rizzolatti, G., Fadiga, L., Gallese, V., & Fogassi, L. (1996). Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions. *Cognitive Brain Reseach*, *3*(2), 131–141.

Rose, J. (2006). Rereading the English Common Reader: A preface to a history of audiences, from Journey of History of ideas, 53 (1992), 47-70. In *The Book History Reader* (Second Edition). Routledge.

Smith, A. (1976). In D. D. Raphael & A. L. MacFie (Eds.), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, M. W. (1996). Conversations about literature outside classrooms: How adults talk about books in their book clubs. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *40*(3), 180–186.

Stein, E. (1964). *On the problem of empathy* (W. Stein, Trans.). Nijhoff.

Stotland, E. (1969). Exploratory Investigations of Empathy. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 4, pp. 271–314). Academic press.

Trubey, E. (2005). "Success is Sympathy": Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Woman Reader. In J. Phegley & J. Badia (Eds.), *Reading women: Literary figures and cultural icons from the Victorian age to the present* (pp. 53–76). University of Toronto Press.

Valentino, R. S. (2005). The Oxymoron of Empathic Criticism: Readerly Empathy, Critical Explication, and the Translator's Creative Understanding. *Poroi*, *4*(1), 108–114.

Whiteley, S. (2010). *Text World Theory and the Emotional Experience of Literary Discourse*. Doctoral Thesis.

Whiteley, S. (2011). Text World Theory, real readers and emotion responses to The Remains of the
　　　Day. *Language and Literature*, *2011*(20), 23–42.

Wimsatt, Jr., W. K., & Beardsley, M. C. (1954). The affective fallacy [1946]. In *The Verbal Icon: Studies
　　　in the meaning of poetry* (pp. 21–39). Methuen.

Zunshine, L. (2006). *Why we read fiction: Theory of mind and the novel*. Ohio State University Press.

APPENDIX A

Transcription symbols

Adapted from Du Bois et al. (1993).

Number:	Sequence of intonation unit in discourse
Initials:	Participant
,	intonation unit (IU) boundary continuative
.	IU boundary terminative
-	IU truncated/interrupted
..	short pause
…	long pause
<Q Q>	speaking as someone else
[ ]	overlap
@	laugh
XXX	unintelligible
X word X	Recording unclear – best approximation given
((WORD))	comment