Lisbeth Stenberg, »Social reading for mental health«

ABSTRACT

Social reading is a praxis that has gained renewed interest during the twenty-first century. In my research project »Social reading — fiction and health« I strive to throw light on if and how the use of group discussions of fiction can play a supportive role in rehabilitation. In this chapter I discuss the results of my exploratory empirical studies of five reading groups, theorizing the processes of interpretation from a sociological perspective.

My results indicate firstly, that group discussions about a text inviting identification tend to result in a deeper understanding of the characters and have the potential to empower individuals. Secondly, texts likely to raise debate rather than lead to role-taking open up for readers to try out new ways of understanding or judging characters that they originally feel unrelated to.

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WHY READING GROUPS?

In Sweden, as in other western countries, depression and other mental health diagnoses have become a growing problem. There is a pressing need for research on new and innovative ways to rehabilitate and socially reintegrate people that for a longer time have been on sick leave. My point of departure for this project was that reading groups – meeting others in the same situation and discussing a literary text – could potentially help individuals in rehabilitation to gain in self-esteem and self-confidence. In popular education study circles have historically been shown to have an empowering effect and in recent years different types of self-help groups seem to work in much the same way for individuals sharing a diagnosis or experiences that have led to social isolation. However, we do not actually know what happens when adults meet to conduct a, to some extent, structured discussion of a text. What are the underlying cognitive processes involved in reading groups? I have asked if there are effects that can be measured using methods inspired from the new research field of empirical studies of literature.

Shared reading has been largely overlooked in literary history. Today the social importance of shared reading has begun to appear in scholarship within the history of reading. In *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*, reading groups from 1740 to 2009 are interrogated. Departing from the concept of community, DeNel Rehberg Sedo argues that shared reading is both a social process and a social formation – different social formations shape themselves around texts. She characterizes reading communities across time with the notions of friendship, enlightenment, and education. During the nineteenth century reading was widely used to create group unity and a sense of belonging, for example, in reading aloud in bourgeois families and in reading for emancipation among the working classes and women. In the twentieth century gathering around books continued to be a source for building collective identities in various groups. It is estimated that in the year 2000 50,000 reading groups existed in Britain and 500,000 in America. A closer study of 355 groups in UK found that around two thirds consisted of women only and the usual pattern were meetings once a month to read fiction. Most of the participants in those groups were middle class and middle-aged. In Sweden reading groups are prolific and at the moment Kerstin Rydsjö, from a literary sociological perspective, is investigating them.
There are various social reading programmes and projects that reach out to people who are not avid readers, for example persons convicted of crimes and young single mothers in the US. In Britain the UK national charity The Reader Organization has within the social inclusion project »Get into Reading« (GIR) started reading groups in prisons and among people with depression symptoms in hard-to-reach communities. The method used for individuals with mental health problems involved reading serious literature aloud to groups, making occasional breaks for group discussions. The University of Liverpool has launched a research center designed to explore how reading can help improve health conditions and the centre evaluates the results of GIR’s therapeutic group interventions. The evaluation came to the conclusion that patients suffering from depression were helped in terms of their social, mental, emotional, and psychological well-being. At Aarhus University in Denmark Mette Steenberg and Pernille Bräuner have, with inspiration from GIR, conducted reading groups in prisons and with people with depression symptoms. The reactions of people in the groups have been followed closely using different measures from theory-of-mind research.

In Sweden there are few reading groups composed of people in rehabilitation. In Region Skåne and the County Council of Östergötland patients, as part of their rehabilitation, or as complementary rehabilitation, have been offered opportunities to participate in various cultural activities. Some research exists but nothing where shared reading experiences are in focus.

Some years ago I was involved in a project where fifteen individuals, mostly librarians and authors, developed a method we called »creative reading«, defined as open dialogues where participants freely formulated their opinions and reflected upon their own experiences and feelings. The method was inspired by bibliotherapy. To avoid a teaching situation and focus on the readers’ own interpretations, all texts used in the creative reading groups, mostly poetry, were presented without disclosure of the author. The method was tested in ten groups but was never evaluated. My experiences from the creative reading project informed the experiments I present in this chapter. But as the method used in the groups partaking in this pilot study were set up a bit differently I do not use the term creative reading but the broader notion of social reading.

In focus for my research on fiction and health is to tease out what happens in the participants’ minds during group discussions of literary texts. A hypothesis was that the discussions would help individuals to develop new perspectives and thus empower them in their situations of crisis and rehabilitation, which they at the time found themselves. My first idea was to, together with four individuals functioning as leaders, create groups of persons in rehabilitation that then could be followed.
This proved difficult to organize. To reach people in rehabilitation and gather groups around reading was not easy. Instead I found five existing groups with twenty-two participants all together that volunteered to take part in my experiments. Those groups had all been meeting for some time, the participants knew each other and trusted their leader. Librarians led two of the reading groups and three groups were connected to folk high schools.

EMPirical STUDY OF LITERATURE

The empirical study of literature is at the moment a field of research that opens up interdisciplinary approaches to understand the processes involving literature and the lives of individual readers. New approaches to arguments for the benefit of reading can be found in theory-of-mind, perspective taking, mentalizing, or mind reading. These terms refer to ways to describe mental processes in different scientific traditions now used to try to understand what happens when a reader engages with a text and its characters. Keith Oatley, professor in cognitive psychology, argues in *Such Stuff as Dreams. The Psychology of Fiction* for theory-of-mind as a way to understand what is going on in the reading process. The term is used in developmental psychology to designate the ability to distinguish our own mind images from another individual’s mind images, that in most humans develops at the age of four. Oatley summarizes some of the empirical studies he and his research group have piloted on individual readers into the effects of reading fiction. He concludes that their findings indicate that fiction does relate to measures of certain social abilities and to possibilities of change of personality. In *Why We Read Fiction* Lisa Zunshine discusses the implications of theory-of-mind for literary studies. She considers fiction to be all about – or nearly all about – theory-of-mind, or finding out why people act as they do. To figure out who-did-it is, for example, the main subject matter of detective stories where Sherlock Holmes and other fictional characters succeed when they can put themselves in the minds of others. Zunshine’s proposal for why we enjoy fiction is that we are good at working out what people are up to. Quite simply, according to Zunshine, because we enjoy what we are good at, we enjoy fiction. In fiction, the author gives us information to enter into our theory-of-mind processes.

Theory of Mind is a cluster of cognitive adaptions that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world. Intensely social species that we are, we thus read fiction because it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind.
Zunshine considers the research conducted today as primarily exploratory but holds hope that it will one day help us fully grasp the levels of complexity that literary engagement entails. The empirical study of literature at large is still in an early stage of development. We find its stronghold among groups of Canadian and Dutch researchers. At the moment a Nordic network of researchers are working to set a Nordic research agenda, first conducting a comparative study on teacher students’ absorption in reading, later hoping to move on to mental health benefits of reading.

Most experiments in the field of empirical studies of literature have been carried out on individual university students. I have found one exception, a study by Zazie Todd who has analysed twenty-one focus group-discussions among students who were avid readers. Her results showed that the participants used the plot to anchor their discussions and that it was important that the readers could feel sympathy for the characters otherwise they were disappointed and dissatisfied with the text. She also found traces of evidence of what David Mial and Don Kuiken call »self-modifying feelings«. At the end of her article Todd suggests further research that could »investigate differences between individual’s perception of a book before and after a reading group discussion«. That was more or less what I set out to do.

--- HOW DO WE MAKE UP OUR MINDS? ---

The self-modifying feelings that Mial and Kuiken anticipated and tried to capture in the experiments mentioned above were only found in a few readers who got a »fresh emotional balance« when taking »the embodied perspective of a figure in the text«. This research, like other studies in the field, shows that it is difficult to empirically isolate reactions to a text that actually make readers change their perspectives. To frame my research theoretically, I am not turning to psychology that has been the most common approach in empirical studies, in its place I connect to social theories that might open for a broader perspective on aspects of reading and make it possible to see links between individuals and their social world.

Sociologist Margaret Archer has posed the question: How does self-knowledge develop? Archer understands a space for »internal conversations« as the way human reflexivity works. Archer has asked what people are doing when they conduct an inner dialogue. Archer’s empirical findings – interviews and on-going theorizing – is at the moment opening up new fields for inter-disciplinary research.

Archer deals with strongly reflexive processes, concerned with the deliberations of people about »matters that are primarily and necessarily social«. Indeed, such negotiations
are what often are going on in a session of social reading. She has identified four reflexive modes, which she claims are related to individual’s values and ultimate concerns and result in different patterns of social mobility. The concept of social mobility in her theoretical framework refers to how individuals relate to one another, how they navigate in their social worlds. According to Archer, communicative reflexives deliberate with the aid and approval of trusted similar others. This »thought and talk« mode is restricting the scope and functions of their reflections and tends to result in contextual restraints and social immobility. These individuals are inclined to remain within the confines of their social worlds, seeking security within a social context that is familiar and predictable. The autonomous reflexive mode implies that individuals do a lot of thinking on their own. In contrast to the communicative reflexives they can thus resist normative pressure from others. Their foremost concern is their place in the social order and they strategically navigate within their social worlds so as to enhance their social position vis-à-vis others. Not all succeed in »getting on the ladder« to economic success, but the mode indicates strategic mobility – the form of individualism promoted in an individualistic society. Meta-reflexives are characterized by a lateral social mobility. Their internal conversations can be lengthy and like the autonomous they are the »little gods« of their own internal conversations – perhaps they reflect even more. Where the autonomous are task oriented, meta-reflexives are value orientated. Always looking for the right way to act they cultivate self-criticism, at the same time they are important critics of a society not meeting their values. They are often found engaged within the voluntary sector in order to promote their values. Finally, fractured reflexivity is the condition in which the inner conversation merely intensifies distress and disorientation without the subject being able to design a purposeful course of remedial action.

Neither philosophy nor social theory has yet presented a solution as to how we indeed talk to ourselves. Archer aspires to show internal conversations as the missing link between society and the individual, structure and agency. She argues that the self-knowledge that »makes up our minds« is an accomplishment, »something that we talk ourselves into«, which is genuinely subjective. I will not argue that Archer’s modes are as »water-tight« as they are presented in her scheme, but I use her to associate the values of the reading experience to a social context. How do individuals learn about the thoughts of others? How do their modes of thinking develop or change?

Hakemulder concludes his investigation into the effects of reading literature stating that »narratives can play a role in moral edification, a way of thinking rather than a way of judging«. In literature we can follow ways of thinking in, for
example, the inner dialogues of characters and we thus have a
unique opportunity to learn how another individual’s mind can
work. This is one argument for how theory-of-mind i.e. our
cognitive responsiveness or sensibility, can be understood as
amended and developed by reading fiction.

--- RESEARCH QUESTIONS ---
Presupposing inner dialogue at work in the reading process my
research questions concern how group discussions influence
these internal conversations. I am in search of factors in
discussions that influence processes of self-concept clarifica-
tion or transformation. Questions asked are if the individual
participants widen or in some sense narrow or deepen their
interpretation of the texts and the characters in it after a group
discussion. How does role-taking/identification with charac-
ters in the texts work when confronted with the opinions of
others in a group discussion? Do group discussions influence
the role-taking/identification of individual readers?

--- MY EXPERIMENTS ---
In order to obtain variations data was collected with question-
naires, thematic interviews, and observation of group dis-
cussions. Together with the leaders of the different groups a
contemporary short story was chosen that was presented
without disclosure of the author. The participants first read
the text individually but in one case it was read aloud. Data
was then collected with a short questionnaire I had designed.
It was filled out individually and collected directly. Then
followed a structured discussion that built on the reactions
of the participants. While I took notes, the instructor led the
discussions; raised new questions to clarify points made, but
did not push for specific interpretations. After the discussion
the same questionnaire was again filled out individually
creating a within-subject design. After the sessions I intervie-
wed some of the participants asking them about their personal
reading history and their opinion of the group
discussion and how it had affected them.

In the following pages I present and discuss my most inter-
esting results. In focus are the reactions to two texts and two
aspects of the responses, which I consider exemplify two
directions indicated by the conducted experiments, that were
the most promising to follow up with further research. Firstly,
my experiments point to the significant impact of identifica-
tion. In the text »Lotten« (»The lottery ticket«) by Jonas Karlsson the
possibility of role taking led to reflexions probably of deep
concern to most of the participants. Who is a »winner« and who
is a »loser«? »Lotten« was used in three groups with in total
twelve participants, seven men and five women. »Lotten« is
about two fathers that together with their daughters take part
in a pre-school party. The story, nine pages long, was chosen as it in an easy language text relates to an everyday situation but still illustrates complicated ethical dilemmas. The questionnaire gave sixteen words to characterize the main character Patrik (considerate, lonely, uncertain, egoistic, winner, loser…) and the same words were suggested to apply to Klara’s father who is not named in the text. The participants were told to underline the words they thought were suited to describe Patrick and Klara’s father respectively. In addition they were encouraged to add words of their own if they wanted to.26

Secondly, I stress the decisive part played by the choice of texts. The varying reactions could foremost be attributed to the different types of texts used. Two texts resulted in little identification but instead opened up discussions about gender, racism and cultural differences. One of these texts »Kostym« (»Suit«) by Ninni Holmqvist was used in two groups with in total ten participants, five men and five women. »Kostym« is set in Singapore and twelve pages long and it was chosen for its provocative gender and moral content. It is told from the first person perspective of »I« who meets Bob at the airport, accompanies him to his hotel, has sex with him, but pulls off a scam and leaves Bob’s room in his clothes and with his money while he is out on a morning jogging round. The questionnaire provided sixteen words to characterize the main characters »I« and Bob.

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING – THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE TAKING

The definition and understanding of identification or similar concepts is central to the field of reader research. In psychoanalytical traditions there has been a continued interest in the problem of identification.27 Frank Hakemulder has introduced the concept of »role-taking« that he contends is responsible for the readers’ emotional involvement.28 In all the tests in my study there was a question, worded a little differently, as to the readers’ personal involvement. All but one of the female readers of »Lotten« willingly identified with the fathers at the pre-school party. All the male readers answered that they could identify. In this respect this text stands out. In response to »Kostym« two women declared that they could partly identify with the »I« and one man admitted after the discussion that he could identify with Bob.

In »Lotten« an everyday situation is depicted and the participants could recognize themselves in the characters. Almost the same number of characteristics were attributed to both the main protagonists in the story, Patrik and Klara’s father, before and after the group conversation. But the seemingly similar reactions were not uninteresting. All the participants changed somewhat their evaluations. In regards to Klara’s father, two
of the female readers became more understanding, one substituting »lying« and »egoistic« for »looser« and »out-sider«, one added »lonely« to her description. Another woman kept »winner« but added »looser«. Patrik was by the female readers seen in almost the same way before and after the discussion. The male readers did not significantly change their opinions of Klara’s father. He was also after the discussion seen as an egoistic liar although one placed him both as a winner and a looser. The male readers were preoccupied by Patrik, the main character, and changed words to characterize him.

In addition to the everyday situation also a focalization on Patrik significantly supported role-taking. The perspective in the story is a combination of a third person narrator, dialogue and focalization solely on Patrik’s reflections, for instance in this passage:

——— Daddy, you said we had won, Linn whimpered […]
—— I know Love, Patrick said. We did. We had the right number but Klara’s father lied and cheated and took the basket. Aloud he said:
—— These things happen. Come, we have to hurry before the rain begins. [My translation] 29

This demonstration of self-talk is simple but can in part explain that this text stands out in a way that made the readers open to reflection. It is noticeable that from the beginning three of the men had placed Patrik as a winner and that after the discussion the three other men had changed from a more negative view into seeing him as a winner. This could imply that they tried out a more positive self-image as a result of a permitting attitude to such an evaluation from the group. I call this an effect of empowerment. I would argue that for all participants their interpretations of the text developed and their understandings of at least the main protagonist, Patrik, were deepened. This led to inner reflections where a profounder, not more varied, evaluation of the character was made.

From a mental health perspective the obvious gain of talking in a group was that this enabled three of the men to change their self-talk. The involvement with the characters could imply that this text in some sense resonated with an identity theme of interest. 30 Who is a winner? Is it necessarily the one carrying off the trophy? Are there other qualities than material success that are important to judge a person? For these groups, composed of individuals at this moment of their lives in rehabilitation, negotiating these questions would be of importance.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Observations of the working of identification found in my experiments provide a clear indication of a gender difference.
In response to all the texts I used in my experiments the female readers are discernable in their openness to identify. In the questionnaire for »Lotten« it was asked if it mattered that the story of the pre-school party had two fathers as the main characters. Two female readers commented: »Some, they seem to want to impress on their daughters and that shows a certain insecurity between child and parent, something that generally is more common among fathers compared to mothers.« The other made a more general statement: »Much is reflected in children. Pre-school can be seen as a miniature of society, and society can be a big pre-school.« These female readers had no problems identifying with the fathers in »Lotten«. Their investment was not only in the central character Patrik but also in Klara’s father. These readers showed an ability of a meta-reflexive type that implies lengthy internal conversations and this gave them access to consider the full complexity of the moral dilemmas presented by the story.

The differences found in my material could of course depend on the individual readers, their literary socialization, or the choice of texts. The result is nevertheless in line with feminist theorizing with inspiration from Laura Mulvey’s pioneering article from 1975 where she argued that women in a patriarchal society are in a position that makes it necessary to be able to identify with male protagonists, but opposed to recent claims by Bortolussi, Dixon & Sopćak who found no decisive gender difference in a major comparative study.

--- PROVOKING A DEBATE. WAYS TO NEW THINKING ---

Frank Hakemulder summarises the findings in what he calls »moral laboratories« and claims that »alleged moral effects are best represented in studies demonstrating changes in readers’ sex-role perception« where story characters were shown to function as role models. The characters in »Kostym« were not perhaps politically correct role models but the reactions to the story were remarkable in the way the text resulted in debates in both groups where it was used. This is a challenging text, which puzzled the participants. A twist at the end of the story opened up new perspectives and interpretative efforts. In one of the groups the polarized opinions ranged from seeing »I« as a »whore« and Bob as a »swine«.

The questionnaire contained multiple-choice questions as to how the two characters, »I« and Bob, could be described. After the discussion, seven of the participants added a significant number of characteristics that were attributed to the characters. The other three had almost the same number of characteristics before and after the group conversation but the content had changed. This implies that the internal conversations of all of them were impacted and enhanced – most not
deepened but rather made more multi-faceted. Most of the participants admitted that the discussion had influenced them.

A distance to the plot, and characters that did not get under their skin, could explain the willingness of the readers to try new ways to describe the characters and to discuss different moral evaluations. A great deal of involvement is also obvious and considerable reflexive work was carried out in the groups. A first step to a more shared opinion came in one group with the suggestion of using the pronoun »hen«. Rather recently there appeared a book in Sweden using the pronoun »hen« instead of »hon« (»she«) or »han« (»he«). The mental leap the participants had to perform when they tried to compare »I« as a man and »I« as a woman made it possible for them to mentally play around with the characters. The double standard expressed by one man when he described the »I« as a »whore« at the beginning of their discussion dissolved. When passing judgments at the end of the discussion both characters were seen in the same way: Both take risks, and have themselves to blame. Also in the other group it was discussed if »I« was a woman and if the moral evaluation would change if »I« was understood to be a man. This group reached almost the same final agreement that both individuals involved were just as responsible and morally questionable.

If the consensus reached in these groups actually had changed the moral evaluation of the participants is, however, uncertain. Three women and one man in one group changed from an ambiguous perception of the »I« to a more positive evaluation; after the discussion »I« was understood as attractive and an adventurer. This can imply that a permitting attitude was strengthened by the group-talk allowing the »I« to be seen as intentional and active. Two men and one woman retained a more negative opinion of the »I« while remaining positive towards Bob. The inner life mirrored in these last results imply that the joint evaluation of the morals of the characters in the story reached in the group-talk was superficial. Their self-talk continued to follow their own initial thoughts in what can be regarded as an autonomous mode of reflection. Following Archer’s theory this implies that individuals heavily rely on their own thinking. In contrast to the communicative reflexives they can thus resist normative pressure from others. The man with an immigrant background, who distinguished himself in his distinctly negative opinion of the »I« as a whore, did not change.

Stereotypical thinking concerning gender might be one of the most difficult conceptions to change. Nevertheless I am convinced that the group talk influenced (at least to a degree) all of the participants in the two groups I observed. For individuals who usually do not listen to or engage with others the experience of an earnest and open discussion can be an important
step to later make changes in his or her internal conversations. To talk about characters in a text is easier than to discuss your own life. The distance involved in literary texts makes it possible to test opinions and try out new moral evaluations.

--- INTERNAL CONVERSATIONS AND NEW QUESTIONS ---

To sum up, in my pilot studies I have seen two interesting traits. Firstly, that group discussions about a text inviting identification or role taking tend to result in a deeper understanding of the characters and have the possibility to empower individuals. When we talk together with others this potentially opens the reader to change an evaluation even when a personal involvement is at stake. Secondly, texts likely to raise debate rather than lead to identification, open up for readers to try out new ways of understanding or judging characters that they originally feel unrelated to.

In my pilot-study I wanted to tease out what happens in the participants’ minds during group discussions of literary texts. In the field of the empirical study of literature, which I have presented as my starting point, the focus is on descriptions of the mental processes of individual readers. In order to inject new theoretical energy into what happens in group discussions I have connected to sociologist Margaret Archer’s question: How does self-knowledge develop? Her notion of »internal conversations« captures the way human reflexivity works. I will now tentatively relate Archer’s four reflexive modes, presented earlier, to my findings and to some research within the empirical study of literature. I will also discuss some results from my observations and interviews that raise new questions.

--- »FRACUTRED REFLEXIVITY« ---

In the groups I met two individuals that displayed what Archer describes as a fractured reflexivity. Fractured reflexivity is understood as a condition in which an individual’s inner conversation merely intensifies distress and disorientation. The person is not able to find a purposeful course of helpful action. This group can include individuals with mental disorders or a person in an acute crisis. One enthusiastic reader I interviewed at the time clearly showed a kind of fractured reflexivity and could not concentrate on reading. A book that evoked memories of problems was at first impossible to confront but as the group continued to meet the texts eventually provided them, she admitted, with the opportunity to raise subjects that would have been difficult to talk about without the help of fictional characters. Another person that might have similar problems found it difficult to write down one word on a post-it-note and testified to having a strong physical reaction to one fictional character in a difficult situation.
In one experiment Don Kuiken, David S. Mial and Shelly Sikora compared how students who had recently lost an important person in their life and how persons whose loss had occurred some time ago reacted to the same text.

We found that, among readers who had reported a significant recent loss, the more depressed the person was, the less she or he reported feeling resonance and shifts in self-perceptual depth during reading. In contrast, among readers who reported a significant remote loss, the more depressed the person was, the more she or he reported feeling resonance and shifts in self-perceptual depth during reading.\footnote{34}

How do you handle persons with physical or mental disorders of the kind dealt with here? Is a group discussion a good option for them? In the group where one avid reader had severe problems with her concentration, the books discussed all dealt with a common problem. The shared reading was a form of intervention that took place in a setting with staff present. It worked well without the professionals interfering, but this was of course a «safety-net» for both the leader of the group and the patients if something had gone wrong.

\textbf{COMMUNICATIVE REFLEXIVES}\footnote{34}

When you listen to others in a group there is a possibility that you take under consideration your initial opinion. If the group is more or less homogeneous all might agree on the same evaluation. This can lead to a feeling of community or shared identity that makes collective action a possibility. From an emancipatory point of view this form of strengthening has worked well for working-class groups and women’s groups. The ‘thought and talk’ mode can potentially provide readers in rehabilitation with a, for them, necessary collective context reinforcing their sense of cognitive capabilities.

Book-talks in reading groups can be compared to the way Archer describes how »communicative reflexives« are deliberating with the aid and approval of trusted similar others. But Archer has raised a warning in regards to this »thought and talk« mode. It can restrict an individual’s reflections and result in contextual confines and social immobility. In a group where compliance is expected the »safe« social gathering might make it more difficult for an individual to break away from, for example, the traditional values that for instance might have been a ground for their emotional problems to begin with. Archer’s warning that a »thought and talk« mode tends to hold individuals back must be taken under consideration concerning groups of persons in rehabilitation. As also discussed in
the GIR-evaluation a diagnosis can offer a passive story of a ‘patient’ who is ill and in need of professional cure. An element of writing could be used to avoid an eventual risk for conformity and discipline. In two of my experiments we involved some writing. This provided a space for everyone in the group to make up their own mind before entering a discussion. The participants were told to write one word in response to a question raised by the text, for example: Chose one word to describe the feeling you had reading the text. Everyone wrote their word on a post-it-note that was put on a board. From there the conversation started as everyone explained her or his view. In one of my interviews the value of inner reflection is emphasized:

— It was a good thing with the post-it-notes; without them we would not have known what to discuss. You then had some time on your own before the discussion started. If you just throw yourself into a discussion you don’t have time to reflect in the same way. When you have written a word down you know why you have written it. This can lead to a better or deeper conversation when you talk about the text as a whole.

One leader had worked out a method where all participants, one after the other, on her request offered one word of his or her own to describe a feeling or characterize a person in a text. The leader immediately wrote all the words down on a flipchart. Each one commentated on their word and later in the group-talk the leader could return to the words and make connections between them. To avoid opinions that were one-dimensional, words could be dealt with thematically. Under headings such as »childhood«, »adult«, »mother« would be asked first for good things in the character’s childhood and then about bad things during the same period. All the participants approved of this method when I interviewed them. It also made it possible for persons who had not had concentration enough to read the discussion text a certain day to participate on the basis of what had been read and discussed at earlier meetings.

In the evaluation of the GIR-project there is an emphasis on the importance of a »thinking space«:

— Shared reading demonstrably made available a safe space to think personally and inwardly about serious human or personal issues, encouraging mindfulness while overcoming isolation. What is described here as a personal or subterranean »thinking space« needs due consideration – together with the power of the literature itself, and the opportunity explicitly to articulate personal feelings in relation to it which the reading groups provide – in asses-
Lisbeth Stenberg, »Social reading for mental health«

... sing how shared reading encourages in participants the capacity to tell a positive, meaningful, comprehensible, life-enhancing story about self.36

This »thinking space« can be interpreted as a cognitive room for »internal conversations«, which Archer understands as the way human reflexivity works. Further research could show how different time periods for self-reflexivity could influence the outcome of a group discussion. The methods used when reading for rehabilitation, as probably the shared reading method of GIR, would benefit from a more varied approach to the different needs of individual readers.

»META-REFLEXIVES«

Archer considers persons with a meta-reflexive mode of thinking important critics of society and agents for change. But she stresses that assuming and practicing a meta-reflexive mode is protracted and arduous.37 Together with Lisa Zunshine and others, who consider fiction to be more or less about learning how other individuals think, I argue that a reflexive mode can be acquired and enhanced by reading fiction. To read on your own would be one way. The text as such is offering new perspectives and gives the reader the opportunity to develop knowledge about how other individuals think and act. To read and then to discuss a text with others is, as discussed above, a valuable tool to influence both a mode of thinking and the understanding of a text.

In response to my experiments two women stood out in their ability to express nuanced opinions about not only the main character in »Lotten«, but also the other characters. In a sense these readers can be regarded as possessing a meta-reflexive mode of thinking. In the interviews it turned out that they read a lot and that both also liked to write, one even in several languages. Their comments on the texts resonate with Archer's opinion that meta-reflexive's could be important critics of a society not meeting their values.

»AUTONOMOUS REFLEXIVES«

Undoubtedly there were individuals in the groups who used what Archer would call an autonomous mode of thinking. Is it possible that reading and discussions can change such an individual's inner dialogue? To this I can only make some suggestions. Placing Archers theorizations in dialogue with the history of reading we can ask if an autonomous reflexive mode of thinking is one result of print culture?

Roger Chartier has outlined an ‘archaeology’ of reading-practises. A point he makes is that print culture created the isolated thinker and in addition it made possible an »extensive« reading, the fast consumption of many texts read without
much afterthought. Chartier establishes a dividing line between «extensive» reading and «intensive» reading, where a small number of texts are read or listened to with reverence and respect. Another dichotomy Chartier discusses is between the intimate, lonely reading designated as one of the bedrocks for the erection of a private sphere and «the collective reading – both disciplined and rebellious of communitarian spaces».

Also Walter Ong has contrasted oral culture to the lonely reader. As he describes it the way by which people communicated in oral cultures had psycho-dynamical effects. Sound, and thus the human voice, privileges the interior. Sight is the sense that differentiates and thus lonely reading works to create distance.

Following Ong one vital question to address in research on reading groups is what difference it makes if the text to be discussed is read aloud to a group or if the participants read on their own.

Today different forms of social networks testify that many feel a need for closer personal relations in associations with texts. As discussed we also find a renewed interest in gathering round a single book or text. A longing for a more intensive reading experience seems to be a sign of the times. At the same time the number of texts readers can find in print and on the Internet is overwhelming and extensive reading might seem to be the only possibility to stay informed and in touch. This might appear a paradox but the reasons for the need of intensive reading today might be a prerequisite to less isolation and a way to learn of others mode of thinking and how to relate to them.

But what might be the result of today’s forms of social or collective reading? Learning from history we know that intensive reading has been a part of building community. Some groups grow in strength while others do not. Today people that are not keen readers are not likely to on there own start or take part in a reading group. The gap between readers in groups that in this way become more active and non-readers is widening. During the interviews I obtained interesting comments, quoted below, from persons that were not excessive readers. They provide us with an indication that some form of shared reading could be a way to raise an interest in literature among reluctant readers.

**Non-readers**

Two of the groups participating in my experiments did not usually work in their rehabilitation as a reading group. When asked how they had experienced discussing two short stories they were very enthusiastic, most so two men who were not great readers. One said: »I hate to read, it’s so boring. My father used to read the Bible and after that I have read some comics – but this short story… I found it great to sit in a ring and talk because everyone had such different opinions, fun to ponder,“
and then how you understand the text after the discussion.« Another related: »You can after, with the help of the opinions of others, work out new nuances, listen more to the opinions of others. Ah shit, I didn’t think of that, that changes a bit what I thought, and so you then ferret out … roughly as you would solve a mathematical problem.« These non-readers had significantly positive experiences with group-reading, which they in turn accounted for how the discussions had led them to more nuanced understandings of the texts and the characters.

A participant in another group had not read much earlier, but after taking part in a reading group said: »Now I have to read before I go to bed. It doesn’t work to sleep otherwise.« The individuals in her group had very different reading backgrounds. I see that as one of the advantages with that group. As they had a common problem they had been able to bridge the differences between them such as social and cultural background.

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**CONCLUSIONS**

My explorative research discussed above indicates that when individuals in rehabilitation come together they can strengthen each other in constructing a more positive self-evaluation that can potentially result in a transformation of their self-concept. The talk in the group for some of the participants allowed for a stronger and a more positive evaluation of an identity position. Taking part in a group can add to a social well-being that is important when you are not in a working team or participate in regular social activities. From a mental health perspective reading groups can thus be considered of value for persons in rehabilitation.

Relating my research to the field of empirical study of literature, I agree with Lisa Zunshine who considers that what empirically can be done today is in a very early exploratory stage. Her hope being that it will one day help us to fully grasp the levels of complexity that literary engagement entails. Dealing with individuals and group processes that I have had in focus holds even more problematic aspects. I will conclude with some useful points to note in reaching out to persons with physical or psychological problems:

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**1.** It is highly significant why a group is organized and who holds the initiative.

**2.** To avoid the risk of adaption and conformity the methods used must provide a ‘cognitive room’ for everyone to have a ‘thinking space’ so as to enhance internal conversations.

**3.** The text is crucial for the outcome of the discussion and it must be chosen in accordance with the aim of the group.

**4.** Taking part in a group might be a good way to reach non-readers who in that way can hypothetically experience the joy of learning to know how others think.
An autonomous mode of thinking can mean that the person is isolated in his or her own world – a meeting of minds in texts and conversations can potentially open new perspectives.

My research indicates that reading groups can offer individuals in rehabilitation a space in which to develop alternative modes of understanding as to how other individuals think and indirectly how they can relate to themselves and others. Reading groups provide exercises in navigating in our social worlds thereby honing our cognitive sensibilities and our ability to "be-in-the-world".

The empirical study of literature is riddled with good intentions and perhaps an exaggerated conviction regarding the good influence of serious literature on readers. A case in point is the work of Hakemulder who for instance considers that "alleged moral effects are best represented in studies demonstrating changes in readers' sex-role perception". I, as discussed above, am more sceptical to what actually happens in an experimental situation where the persons involved easily can understand what answers are politically correct, PK. However, awaiting more scientifically reliable results, this type of research can raise questions that can be of value for practical use in pedagogical situations.

APPENDIX

Questionnaires used in the experiments. Here translated to English with additional information on the author and the text.

»Kostym« / »Suit«

Personer: »Jag« och Bob / Characters: »I« and Bob

Vad får du för känsla när du läst texten?
What is your feeling after reading the text?

Egna ord / In your own words ...........................................

Kan du helt eller delvis känna igen dig/identifiera dig med någon av personerna?
Can you wholly or partly identify with one of the characters?

Egna ord / In your own words ...........................................

Hur uppfattar du »jaget«? / How do you apprehend / comprehend »I«?
Stryk under ett eller flera ord du tycker kan stämma in på hur du uppfattar »jag«. / Underline one or more words you find suitable to characterize of how you see »I«.

vänlig, charmig, fantasifull, attraktiv, friendly, charming, imaginative, attractive,
deprimerad, pedantisk, djärv, vilsen, depressed, pedantic, bold, disoriented,
planerande, distanserad, manipulerande, feg, planning, distanced, manipulative, cowardly,
sökande, impulsiv, självsäker, osäker, inquisitive, impulsive, self-confident, insecure,

Egna ord / In your own words .............................................

Hur uppfattar du Bob? / How do you apprehend/comprehend Bob?

Stryk under ett eller flera ord du tycker kan stämma in på hur du uppfattar »jag«. / Underline one or more words you find suitable to characterize of how you see »I«.

vänlig, charmig, fantasifull, attraktiv, friendly, charming, imaginative, attractive,
deprimerad, pedantisk, djärv, vilsen, depressed, pedantic, bold, disoriented,
planerande, distanserad, manipulerande, feg, planning, distanced, manipulative, cowardly,
sökande, impulsiv, självsäker, osäker, inquisitive, impulsive, self-confident, insecure,

Egna ord / In your own words .............................................

»Lotten« / The lottery ticket

Personer: Patrik Ohlsson och Linn, hans dotter, Klara och Klara’s father
Characters: Patrik Ohlsson and Linn, his daughter, Klara and Klara’s father
Kan du helt eller delvis känna igen dig/identifiera dig med någon av personerna? / Can you wholly or partly identify with one of the characters?

Egna ord / In your own words …………………………………

Hur uppfattar du Patrik? / How do you apprehend /comprehend Patrik?

Stryk under ett eller flera ord du tycker kan stämma in på hur du uppfattar Patrik. / Underline one or more words you find suitable to characterize how you see Patrik.

omtätnskam, ensam, feg, mogen, considerate, lonely, cowardly, mature,

realistisk, egoistisk, lögnaktig, osolidarisk, realistic, egoistic, lying, disloyal,

uppgiven, osäker, vinnare, förlorare, overwhelmed, uncertain, winner, loser,

aggressiv, utanför, självsäker tuff, aggressive, outsider, self-confident, tough,

Egna ord / In your own words …………………………………

Hur uppfattar du Klaras father? / How do you apprehend/comprehend Klaras father?

Stryk under ett eller flera ord du tycker kan stämma in på hur du uppfattar Klaras father. / Underline one or more words you find suitable to characterize how you see Klara’s father.

omtätnskam, ensam, feg, mogen, considerate, lonely, cowardly, mature,

realistisk, egoistisk, lögnaktig, osolidarisk, realistic, egoistic, lying, disloyal,

uppgiven, osäker, vinnare, förlorare, overwhelmed, uncertain, winner, loser,

aggressiv, utanför, självsäker tuff, aggressive, outsider, self-confident, tough,

Egna ord / In your own words …………………………………
Do you think it matters that the story is about two fathers and their daughters?

Egna ord / In your own words .................................................

--- ENDNOTES ---

The project is funded by the Anna Ahrenberg Fund, Gothenburg.

2 DeNel Rehberg Sedo: An introduction to reading communities. Processes and formations in idem (ed.): Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace (London, 2011), 11.
3 The importance for the working classes in the UK is shown by Jonathan Rose: The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (New Haven/London, 2001) while Anne Ruggles Gere: Intimate Practices. Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs, 1880–1920 (Urbana, 1997) is one of a couple of studies concerning literary practices among women in the US.
6 Läsarnas cirklar. En litteratursociologisk undersökning om socialt läsande och läsargemenskaper i dagens Sverige, project at Uppsala University.
7 Oatley: Such Stuff as Dreams, 185, where the last chapter, 178–187, has the title »Talking about fiction« where he gives some examples of such groups.
9 Josie Billington et al.: An Investigation into the Therapeutic Benefits of Reading in Relation to Depression and Well-Being (Liverpool, 2010), 24, 81.
10 Some results have been published, Pernille Bräuer: »Når barske drenge læser blid poesi. En undersøgelse af læsegrupper i Ringe Statsfængsler« (Faglig rapport fra Interacting Minds Centre. Aalborg, 2014).
11 In Region Skåne patients in the project Kultur på recept (Prescribed culture) participated in a group two to three times
a week and then tried out a set of different cultural activities. One was to visit the library. In Östergötland patients in the project Må bra med kultur (Feel Good with Culture) could choose to take part in a group for instance to paint, dance or discuss books. The meetings were regular, once a week or twice a month.


13 In total my material has been forty reactions to six texts. Three texts that worked well (»Lotten«, »Kostym«, »Jul för fan«) were used in more than one group. In order not to disclose identity I have chosen to discuss the results together and not unnecessarily single out the responses of different groups. The groups were very specific and the participants suffered from some kind of psychological disorder, such as social phobia, depression, fatigue syndrome, anxiety disorders or more physical disorders such as stroke, one group had problems connected to drug abuse.

14 Oatley: Such Stuff as Dreams, 162.

15 Lisa Zunshine: Why We Read Fiction. Theory of Mind and Fiction (Columbus, 2006), 121–155 on detective novels, quote 162.

16 Zunshine: Why We Read Fiction, 164.

17 A series of NOS-HS (Nordisk samarbeidsnemnd for humanistisk og samfunnsvitenskapelig forskning) Exploratory Workshops coordinated by Anne Mangen, University of Stavanger aim to create a Nordic research agenda of interdisciplinary, empirical research on experiential literary reading.


21 Archer: Making our Way, 3.


24 Jèmeljan (Frank) Hakemulder: The Moral Laboratory. Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept (Amsterdam, 2000), 158.

25 The length of the interviews varied from ten to thirty minutes. One was an interview with a group of three.

26 This type of questionnaire was shown to work best. For some other texts I tried out more open-ended questions, but that resulted in significant non-response.
Lisbeth Stenberg, »Social reading for mental health«

32 M. Bortolussi, P. Dixon & P. Sopćak: »Gender and reading« in *Poetics* 38, (2010), 299–318. The reason for their findings
I think might be attributed to the texts they used. The texts
were first pages of some detective novels that probably not
invited role-taking.
33 Hakemulder: *The Moral Laboratory*, 152.
34 Don Kuiken, David S. Mial & Shelly Sikora: »Forms of
self-implication in literary reading« in *Poetics Today* 25:2
36 Billington et al.: *An Investigation*, 54.
38 Roger Chartier: *The Order of Books. Readers, Authors,
and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eight-
40 Zunshine: *Why We Read Fiction*, 164.
41 Hakemulder: *The Moral Laboratory*, 152.