FICTIONAL NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY CHANGE:

THREE PATHWAYS THROUGH WHICH STORIES INFLUENCE THE DIALOGICAL SELF

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Abstract

Fictional narratives have the potential to influence people who read, view or listen to them. A body of studies has found that stories can change people's identity or sense of self. This chapter proposes a theoretical model conceptualizing the impact of fictional narrative experiences on the dialogical self. Three pathways are proposed through which stories influence identity: a personal pathway (through fictional role models and possible selves), a cultural pathway (by offering narrative themes and structures used in interpersonal and intrapersonal self-dialogue) and a reflective pathway (when stories increase self-awareness and help people to adopt or switch between alternative selves or I-positions). The objective of this chapter is to introduce a new model to explain the impact of narrative fiction on the self, grounded in Dialogical Self Theory, which can shed a new light on the processes that underlie this impact.

Introduction

C.S. Lewis once said: "In great literature, I become a thousand different men but still remain myself." This quote reflects the power of stories: through literature and other types of fictional narratives, such as movies, books and television series, we experience a multitude of different lives – lives we experience through the eyes of others, of the story characters or the narrator. Stories can serve as entertainment or an escape from our daily lives (e.g. Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004), they can influence our thoughts and feelings (e.g. Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Mar, Oatley, Djikic & Mullin, 2011; Poulson, Duncan & Massie, 2005), and they can help to understand the world around us (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992), including others (e.g. Kidd & Castano, 2013) and – ultimately - ourselves (Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman & Peterson, 2009; Fialho, 2012).

According to Bruner (2003) "We are so adept at narrative that it seems almost as natural as language itself" (p.3). Besides consuming stories, we also compose them. The most important narrative we compose is the narrative of who we are, our identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2008). People create and rewrite their own life-stories while they age, engaging in dialogue, creating coherence and giving meaning to their lives (e.g. Bruner, 2003; Eakin, 1999; Linde, 1993). These self-narratives help us make sense of who we are, and give us direction in life (McAdams, 2008).

Several empirical studies have shown that narrative fiction can promote self-reflection, increase self-awareness and even change or expand people's sense of self (Djikic et al., 2009; Fialho, 2012; Kuiken, Miall & Sikora, 2004). For example, studies found that readers expressed a powerful self-change after reading books or short stories (Ross, 1999; Sabine & Sabine, 1984), participants showed self-perceptual changes in Big Five personality traits after reading a literary story (Dijkic et al., 2009), and that teenagers changed their beliefs and self-perceptions after seeing fictional characters in teen movies (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). However, currently there is little understanding of *how* this process unfolds. In particular, the theoretical link between fictional narrative experience and identity remains unclear.

A dominant theory in the larger field of media studies, often used for explaining identity change by fictional narratives experiences, is the media effects model, which explains how media influence human cognition, affect, believes and behavior through psychological mechanisms, such as priming, framing and agenda setting (e.g. Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). The main focus of the media effects model is the general impact of media on human behavior, therefore a large body of research is centered around topics like the impact of aggressive media on aggressive behavior (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001) or the illustrations of slim woman in the media and its impact on body satisfaction (Groesz, Levine & Murmen, 2002). While this theory is valuable for conceptualizing the general impact of media consumption, it has also been criticized for its underlying assumptions that people are passive consumers of media instead of active users, and that media influence people in similar ways, thereby not accounting for individual differences (for an overview see Gauntlett, 1998). The interaction of individual readers and viewers with fictional narratives can therefore not be fully explained by the media effects model. Furthermore, fictional narrative experiences are not considered passive encounters, which makes the link between stories and behavior more complex (Bal, 2009). For example, reading a fictional narratives require more mental effort than listening to music, because readers have to actively construct a representation of the described story events (Bal, 2009; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; 2009; Gerrig, 1993; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). They can therefore not be considered passive users of media (Bal, 2009).

Concepts of identity change have also been described as changes in mental models and schemata evoked by the process of transportation – being absorbed into the narrative world (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004; see also Gerrig, 1993). Readers become part of the narrative world, interpreting the text from the perspective of the narrator (e.g. Brokerhof, 2012; Gerrig, 1993, Segal, 1995). In other words, the reader becomes "the writer of his or her own version of the story" (Oatley, 2002, p.43; see also Bal, 2009), a process also referred to as the refiguration of the novel (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992). Even though valuable as a mediator of narrative impact on the self, transportation theories reflect less on *how* identity change follows after people experience transportation into a fictional narrative.

In literary studies, reader response theory (Iser, 1979) is frequently used to explain individual reader experiences in relation to literary or complex texts. In addition to transportation theory, emotional change is theorized to explain the influence of fictional narratives on identity, such as in Djikic and colleagues (2009) who propose emotional change as a mediator between reading a story and changes in people's perception of their personality traits. While reader response theory takes into account individual experiences, it solely focuses on the impact of reading – often literary - narratives, not on the influence of movies. Moreover, studies often focus on stages of reading or on the type of textual elements that evoke self-reflection, yet still little is known on *how* literary narratives change the self.

This chapter will explore the link between the experience of fictional narratives and identity change through the theoretical lens of Dialogical Selves Theory (DST) by Hermans (Hermans, 2014; Hermans, & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992). DST, grounded in both psychological notions of self from William James (1890) and the work of literary critic Bakhtin (1973), emphasizes the polyphonic nature of identity (Hermans, 2014) that can incorporate innovation and transformation through dialogue (Gonçalves & Ribeiro, 2012; Hermans, 2004). A theoretical model will be introduced, conceptualizing the influence of fictional narrative experience on the dialogical self, with the objective to shed new light on the processes that underlie fictional narrative impact on identity. Three pathways are proposed through which narrative fiction can change individual identity. First, fictional narratives can offer fictional role models and introduce possible selves that become incorporated in the extended self-domain. Second, narrative themes and structures influence how people conceptualize and structure their social and narrative identity. Third, narrative fiction can help people to adopt a meta-position of self-reflection. By enhancing people's capacity to understand an event or story from different perspectives or by the experience of *de-familiarizing* story elements, fictional narratives can increase self-awareness or help people adopt or switch between alternative selves or I-positions.

Fictional Narrative Experience

Fictional stories and literary theory have been previously linked to Dialogical Self Theory (e.g. Barani, Wan Yahya & Bin Talif, 2014; Rojek, 2009). This chapter focuses particularly on the *experience* of fictional narratives: reading a book, listening to a short story or watching a movie. The term 'fiction' was already described by Aristotle, who distinguished fiction or poetry from history or facts. Contradictory to history or facts, which are supposed to represent truth and reality, fiction belongs to the realm of possibilities, encompassing what *could* occur (Aristotle in Halliwell, 1987; see also Appel & Richter, 2007). Works of fiction do not aim to provide information or detailed world knowledge; they are a product of imagination, and can thereby describe different

times, places and even realities (Apple & Richter, 2007; Oatley, 1999; Philips, 1995). Therefore, Aristotle stated that history or facts are about the particular, whereas fiction represents the universal (335 BC; trans. 1996).

To some extent, fictional narratives are always tied to the factual world, since they are rooted in reality, and often consist of a mix of true facts and imagined elements, thereby creating an experience of verisimilitude, or truth-likeness (Apple & Richter, 2007; Bruner, 1986; Philips, 1995). Since some non-fiction accounts, for example autobiographies, can contain fictional elements, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are not always clear (e.g. Oatley, 1999; for postmodern critiques on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction see, e.g. Ricoeur, 1984). Nevertheless, fiction and non-fiction have been considered to be different in their intentions, where non-fiction is written with an informative purpose, and fiction serves imaginative and emotional functions (e.g. see Oatley, 1999).

Secondly, narrative can be defined as "the representation of real or fictitious events and situations in a time sequence" (Prince, 1982, p.1; for an overview see also Rudrum, 2005). This and other definitions of narrative share two important elements: *fabula* and *sjuzet*, where *fabula* refers to the 'raw aspects' a story is based on and *suzjet* to the representation and manipulation of these aspects, giving meaning to these events (e.g. Bal, 2009). Fundamental to a narrative is also that there is a narrator, a person who tells the story, but who does not necessarily coincide with the author (Bal, 2009). Additionally, narratives need interlocutors to give meaning to a story; in the case of books, readers who actively construct, and thereby even re-write the story they read (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992; Bal, 2009). Even though non-fictional narratives have been studied in social contexts, such as organizational culture (e.g. Humphreys & Brown, 2002), it is difficult to completely separate them from fiction because even though they reflect real life, they are still constructed by narrators (Bruner, 1986).

Narrative Impact

Researchers of a variety of scientific disciplines have explored the effects of reading fictional stories, for example in behavioral sciences (e.g. Green, Strange & Brock, 2002), cognitive psychology (Marsh, Meade & Roediger, 2003), communication studies (Appel, 2008; Appel & Richter, 2010) and even medicine (McLellan & Jones,1996). These studies have found that reading narrative fiction can serve as a powerful tool for persuasion (Green & Brock 2002; Wheeler, Green & Brock, 1999), and can be used for bibliotherapy (MacCullis & Chaberlain, 2013). There is growing evidence that reading narrative fiction can enhance interpersonal skills and foster empathy in readers (Bal & Veltkamp, 2011; Ferrari, Westrate & Petro, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; for an exception see Dijkstra et al., 2015). Additionally, stories often revolve around ethical or moral dilemmas and since readers have to infer the motives and emotions of the characters, stories have been found to increase ethical awareness and altruistic behavior (Hakemulder, 2000; Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Therefore, literature or complex

stories are used to improve moral awareness and reasoning skills, for example in business school education (Sucher, 2007).

Besides understanding others, narrative fiction has shown to impact people's sense of self (Djikic et al., 2009; Fialho, 2012; Sikora, Kuiken & Miall). For instance, Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile and Arkin (2014) found that self-expansion occurs in people are exposed to fictional characters if these participants were transported –or absorbed - into the narrative. In other studies, people expressed transforming experiences when they read books (Ross, 1999). Sabine and Sabine (1983) interviewed a sample of 1400 Americans, asking them what books had made a difference in their lives and concluded that stories initiated powerful changes in the self (Sabine & Sabine, 1983). The next sections will explore the processes underlying narrative impact on the self, introducing a conceptual model that is grounded in Dialogical Self Theory.

Dialogical Self Theory

This chapter conceptualizes the processes that underlie the impact of narrative fiction on the self from the perspective of Dialogical Selves Theory (DST; Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 2014; 2001). DST perceives the self as a society of I-positions, which are distinctly different from another, but are part of a person's inner dialogue. They include both social and personal positions, such as 'me as a perfectionist', 'me as a dreamer', 'me as a parent', 'me as a sports fan', 'me as an ambitious employee' or 'me as a reader', and they can be closely connected but also represent strongly contrasting positions.

DST is partly founded on William James' (1890) notion of 'I' of 'Me' and 'Mine', where the 'I' (the self-as-knower) reflects on the 'Me' (the self-as-known) that incorporates elements, roles or people belonging to oneself, as the 'Mine' (see also Hermans, 2001). DST also has roots in the work of literary critic Bakhtin (1929/1973) who used the metaphor of the polyphonic novel to describe the work of Russian novelist Dostoevsky, which in Bakhtin's vision consists of various independent authors or voices. Inspired by both theories, DST combines the notion of a unity or centrality of self – the 'I' of James – that keeps a person's identity together, with the discontinuity and multiplicity of different selves or I-positions as presented in Bakhtin's polyphony, that underlies decentering movements of the self.

"The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions, and has the capacity imaginatively to endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story." (Hermans, 2001, p.248)

Key to DST is the importance of dialogue: via interpersonal or intrapersonal dialogue different positions within the self can be inhabited or even developed (e.g. Hermans, 2004). The dialogical self is *in flux* and the DST framework can therefore incorporate innovation and transformation of the self (Gonçalves & Ribeiro, 2012).

Meta-position of Self

The different I-positions within a person are connected through dialogical relationships and they exchange experiences and knowledge about their respective 'Me' (Hermans, 2014). This contributes to a "complex, multivoiced, narratively structured self" (Hermans, 2014, p.139). In daily life, people move from I-position to I-position. Coalitions of the most dominant I-positions work together producing thoughts, feelings and behavior. Yet, people are often not aware of the I-positions and dialogical structures that underlie these processes (Hermans, 2014). DST is often used in counseling, where the therapist and client try to create an overview of different I-positions that work together in a maladaptive fashion – this overview is also called a dialogical space (Hermans, 2014). In order to gain insight into the self, or to obtain a 'helicopter view' people can adopt a meta-position. According to Hermans (2014, p.147), "the meta-position can be described as an overview of a greater variety of specific positions, including their mutual links and associated voices". This position, which is crucial for a deepened understanding of the self, is often the aim of counseling, but it can also be achieved by internal dialogue (Hermans, 2014).

The External Domain of Self and Society

The core of the society of selves in DST – the internal domain of self - can be depicted as various I-positions that are in contact with another (e.g. Hermans, 2014). In addition, to incorporate the representation of others within the self, DST has conceptualized the external domain of self (e.g. Hermans, 2001; 2014). The external domain of self is still part of a person's self, yet, it consists of other people, either real or imaginary, that occupy positions in the multi-voiced self (Hermans, 2001; 2014). These positions or selves do not encompass 'actual' others, but they are personal interpretations of them that have become part of people's self. The external domain allows people to gain alternative perspectives on the world, as if one momentarily steps into the shoes of another person.

Often, important people for a person's identity reside in this domain, for example parents, partner, friends and colleagues, but new persons – also imaginary or non-real people – can enter this space within the self (Hermans, 2014; 2001). For example, a projection of a counselor can often be found after several counseling sessions (Hermans, 2014). Applied to the context of religious narrative experiences, an important or influential character that can occupy a position within the extended domain of self is Jesus. An example of this is the 'What would Jesus do?' movement, whereby people actively reason from their interpretation of Jesus and the Bible.

The Self as a Structure of Circles

In Hermans (2014) the internal domain of self can be seen as the core circle of the self. Around this semipermeable circle is the extended domain, which is still part of the self but less close to the core and which is

depicted by another permeable circle around the core circle (e.g. Hermans, 2001, 2014). Positioned around this is society – the environment people live in and the social and cultural influences this environment exerts on them. The changeable nature of self by external influences on both the internal and external domain of self is represented by the permeability of these domains. Media at large, and fictional narratives in particular, will reside within society. Yet, the previously described impact of fictional narratives on identity and self shows that fictional characters or the fictional world can become part of the self-domain. Additionally, the mental process of story refiguration and the interaction with literary or complex stories might induce or contribute to a meta-position of self, the position that promotes in-depth self-reflection via a dialogical space.

The Impact of Fictional Narrative Experience on the Dialogical Self

This chapter proposes a theoretical model conceptualizing the influence of fictional narrative experience on the dialogical self. Figure 1 shows the internal domain of self, the external domain of self and the societal surroundings (as in Hermans, 2001; 2014). The lines of these are permeable, signifying the influence of one domain on the other and on the domains on the separate selves or I-positions. The (possible) dialogue between the selves or I-positions is represented by the dotted lines.
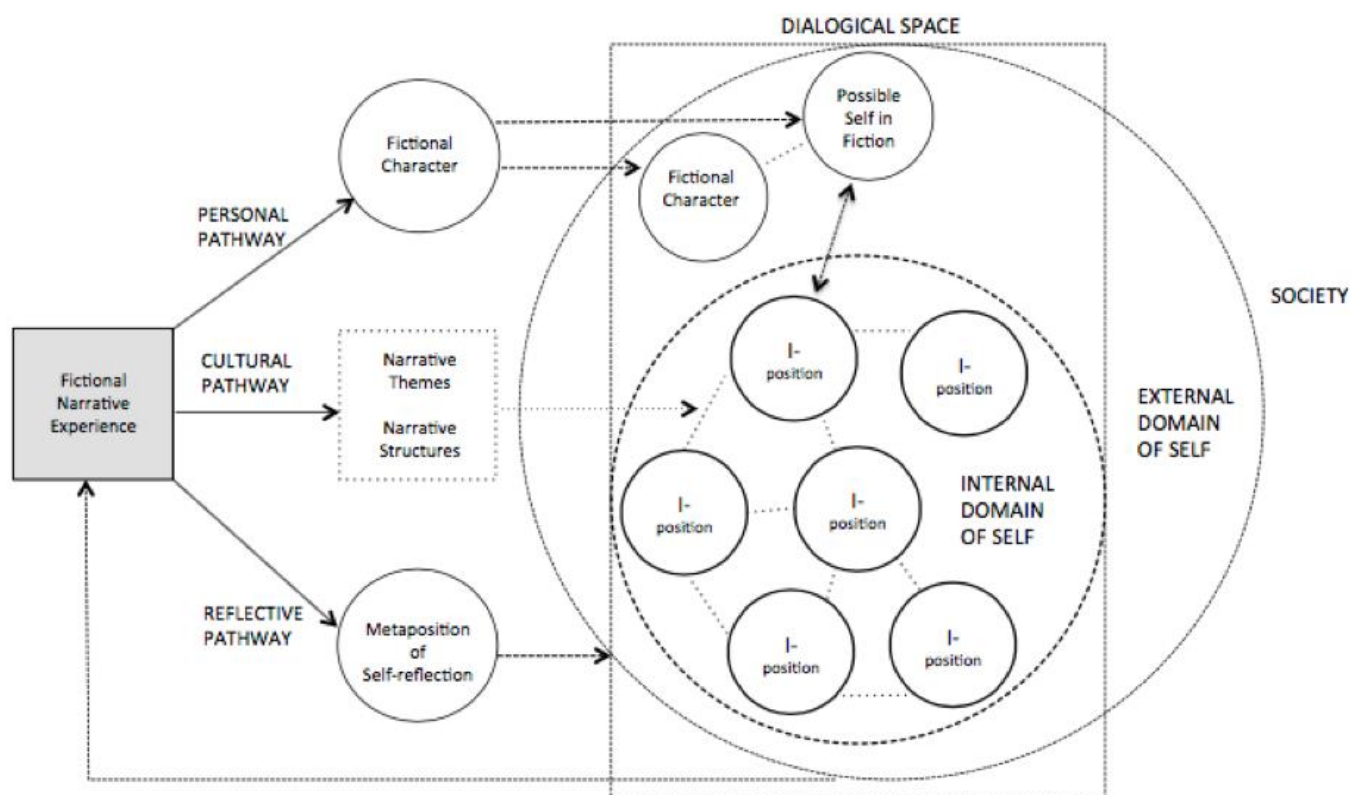

Figure 1. Changes in the Dialogical Self by a Fictional Narrative Experience

The left side of the model depicts the fictional narrative experience, such as reading a novel or a short story or watching a movie. Fictional narratives reside in society, however, fictional narrative experience can influence or enter the domains of self. This influence is conceptualized through three different pathways: the personal, cultural and reflective pathway. First, the personal pathway shows how fictional characters can enter the external domain of self and thereby expand the self. In addition, fictional characters might represent or become possible selves - "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.954) - that form a closer relationship to one or more I-positions of the internal domain. Second, the cultural pathway shows how the fictional world and narrative structures used in stories can influence interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue and thereby change identity. Third, the reflective pathway explains how complex, thought-provoking or literary narratives can challenge people to such an extent that they move to a meta-position of self-reflection, constructing an overview over different I-positions or selves.

While the arrows form left to right represent the three different pathways through which a fictional narrative experience can lead to identity change, the line from the self towards the fictional narrative experience represents a feedback loop that reflects the process of refiguration of the story (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992) and the mental models and frames that contribute to the understanding and the personal experience of a fictional narrative (Bal, 2009). The sections below will elaborate on each pathway, followed by a discussion and recommendations for future research. Table 1 presents an overview of the three different pathways and the underlying processes and their implications.

The Personal Pathway

When people experience a story, they have insight into the feelings, thoughts and motivations of the narrator or different fictional characters (e.g. Bal, 2009). Fictional narratives can thereby offer people inspiring role models or even alternative selves (Richardson & Eccles, 2007). The personal pathway in the model explains how stories can *expand* the self, by adding an extra voice or I-position to the internal dialogue. In case of a very influential fictional narrative (e.g. a person's favorite book that they re-read several times) this extra voice may remain as part of the self for a longer duration, but in other cases the dialogue might last shorter. Our present postmodern era intensifies and accelerates the flux and flow of positions in and out of the self-space (Hermans, 2001). Narrative fiction can contribute to this flux. The model proposes two mechanisms by which fictional narratives can expand the self via the personal pathway: role models and possible selves.

Table 1. Overview of the Three Different Pathways

Pathway	Narrative Impact	Process	Changes in Self	Examples
Personal	A fictional character becomes a guide, role model or possible self.	Broadening or expanding the self	a) Adding a fictional role model or guide in the external domain of Self b) Adding or activating a possible self in close relation to I-positions in the internal domain of self	What would Harry Potter do? What would Gandalf do? Undergraduate student: I have been watching *Suits* and now I realize I also want to specialize in law
Cultural	The ideas represented in the fictional story world or the narrative structures influence narrative identity	Establishing the structure of intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue	a) Narrative themes, e.g. 'good' versus 'bad' forces and dominant story metaphors become incorporated in the self b) Narrative structures of fiction are used for constructing identity	Harry Potter fan: I am against Donald Trump, he is like the bad Lord Voldemort. Seeing a Hollywood movie activates the part of myself that believes that one day I will find true love and my happily ever after.
Reflective	A complex or thought-provoking story or literary narrative de-familiarizes people from their	A dialogical space is created, where a meta-position is adopted that has an overview of different I-	a) A deepened understanding of the self-domains and I-positions	Reader of Kafka's Metamorphesis: different characters in this story represent different parts of me. I feel trapped like Gregor, but I am also

	daily routines	positions and their dialogical dynamics		dominant towards others, similar to Gregor's father.
			b) Recognizing perspectives of the coalition of dominant I-positions and actively looking for alternatives	In my job, I feel trapped like Gregor, which is related to dominant I-positions of 'me as fearful' and 'me as inferior'. How can I adopt the I-positions of 'me as brave' and 'me as open to new experiences' at work that are dominant when I travel?

Fictional Role Models

Characters of novels or movies can become guides or role models, similar to the representation of the father, mother or – in counseling situations – therapist in the external domain of self (e.g. Hermans, 2014). When an inspiring fictional character enters the domain of self, it is the personal *interpretation* and *reflection* a person has of this character that influences the self. Similar to the process of social learning (Bandura, 1969) such an external I-position can offer people an example of how to behave or think. Even though it seems plausible that most of these external I-positions would be positive and inspirational, these fictional role models could also be negative and serve as a prevention of 'how not to be', as for example in a study by Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda (2002) who found that negative role models are most motivating for prevention-oriented people. When powerful enough, projections of fictional characters could enter the external domain of self and become part of our identity.

The well-known example of *What Would Jesus Do?* as mentioned above, has been extended to several fictional characters, often those with a wise character or strong moral vision. Examples are: *What would Gandalf do?* (Lord of the Rings) and *What Would Dumbledore Do?* (Harry Potter; see also Knudslien, 2015). Central to this concept is that this fictional character becomes part of people's identity, serving as guiding figure. When making a decision or thinking about one's behavior, the representation of this fictional character can be consulted. While engaged in internal dialogue someone with Gandalf or Dumbledore in their external domain of self, can reason and behave from this perspective.

Possible Selves in Fiction

A second mechanism in the personal pathway in which fictional narratives can impact the self, is by showing people how life *could* be. When an individual becomes transported or absorbed into a story and experiences the world through the main character's eyes, this experience can affect the reader's own life (Green & Brock, 2002). Fictional narratives can thereby provide people with possible selves (Martínez, 2014). Central to the transition from a fictional character to a possible self, is narrative identification, the "process that culminates in a cognitive and emotional state in which the audience member is aware not of him- or herself as an audience member, but rather imagines being one of the characters in the text" (Cohen, 2001, p.252; see also Liebes, & Katz, 1990; Igartua, 2010).

An I-position derived from or activated by a possible self would be of the structure 'me as wanting to be like the story character'. For example, an undergraduate student who was previously undecided about her future career, wants to specialize in law after watching the drama series *Suits*, which portrays the daily life of people working at a law firm. In this case, the fictional characters represent a desired or wished-for possible future work self (e.g. see Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012).

Fictional characters can become possible selves by activating dormant I-positions already present in the self or they can promote new I-positions. In many cases, possible selves in fiction will activate or confirm existing I-positions, but they could also challenge people. For example, in a longitudinal interview study, Richardson and Eccles (2007) found that "reading allowed adolescents to explore *possible selves* – an interest in historical figures helped one African American male to develop values resisting stereotypes of *male* or *African American*, just as an African American female came to resist conforming to gender and racial stereotypes in dress and occupational ambitions" (p.341). When the introduction of a new possible self is so strong that it puts readers or viewers in a reflective state, they might move from adding new selves though the personal pathway, towards a meta-position of self in the reflective pathway (see below).

Even though role models and possible selves are strongly intertwined (see also: Lockwood & Kunda, 2002), possible selves are more closely related to I-positions in the internal self-domain. In the theoretical model, therefore, the role models or guides described above remain in the external domain of self, whereas possible selves derived from fictional experiences are connected to the I-positions of the internal domain of self.

The Cultural Pathway

Narratives and culture are deeply intertwined (e.g. Berger, 1996; McCracken, 1998). On a social level, the composition, telling and retelling of stories shapes cultures, including folklore and popular culture (e.g. Bruner, 2003; Cawelti, 2014; Stephens & McCallum, 2013) and organisational cultures in the workplace (Schein, 1996).

On a personal level, the narrative elements of people's social environment and culture influence the construction of identity (Vassilieva, 2016). In the model of figure 1, the box around the narrative structures is especially permeable because of their reciprocal relationship with reality, stories express verisimilitude (e.g. Apple & Richter, 2007) and reversely narrative fiction has an impact on (popular) culture (Kellner, 2003; see also Munévar, 2016; Oatley, 1999).

Whereas the personal pathway will add selves or I-positions, the cultural pathway influences the themes or structure of interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue. A central element to the dialogical self is how the dialogical process is organized and people's social and cultural environment plays a crucial role in this (Hermans, 2001). Fictional narratives, in turn, are central to this environment. The cultural pathway of narrative impact influences the self in two ways. First, the story themes influences people's cultural beliefs and their social identity - how they categorize their world - for example the dichotomy of 'good' versus 'bad' and beliefs in a just world that are often activated by stories (e.g. Appel, 2008). Secondly, it creates narrative story structures (e.g. plot, central themes) and metaphors that people use to construct identity (e.g. Berger, 1996).

Narrative Themes

In today's world, the immense entertainment industry plays a significant role in popular culture and in the lives of the people who consume these popular narratives (McCracken, 1998). These fictional narratives provide people with social categorizations and beliefs, for example the belief in a just world (Appel, 2008). Reversely, popular narratives also offer information about the culture or society in which they are created, reflecting social identity of the main audience (McCracken, 1998). Furthermore, popular narratives often provide people with predictability, by portraying traditional themes or dichotomies like a 'heroes versus villains' or genres such as tragedy and comedy – already identified by Aritsotle (384-322 B.C.) - which give people the means to create coherence in their sense of self (Berger, 1992; McCracken, 1998). Thereby, fictional narratives provide people with social categorizations embedded in narrative themes (McCracken, 1998).

Besides confirming collective stereotypes and beliefs, narrative fiction can also offer people a new perspective or help them make sense of a new or historical political or social situations, such as literature written after the South-African Apartheid regime (e.g. see Moslund, 2003). Literary narratives, which are challenging by nature, often show themes, ideas and concepts that diverge from the dominant culture and should therefore always be 'foreign' in some way (e.g. Saunders, 2001). The type of impact that narrative themes and concepts – of both popular and literary fictional narratives - can have on people's personal identity is diverse and a research topic in itself. Therefore, a full exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Some popular stories become so influential, that they become part of larger society debates. An example of this societal impact is Harry Potter. Millions of fans have joined the virtual world of Pottermore and newspaper articles have analyzed the Harry Potter books in relation to real-world issues (see also Mutz, 2016). Recently, American President Donald Trump has been compared repeatedly to Lord Voldermort (e.g. see Kickham, 2016). This resonates with the clear portrayal of 'good' (e.g. Harry) versus 'bad' or 'pure evil' (Lord Voldemort) in the story. When Harry Potter fans compare Donald Trump to this clear-cut evil fictional categorization, they want to differentiate themselves from that person.

Narrative Structures

Besides providing people with mental categorizations and narrative themes, stories can also influence the way people structure their own life story, constituting the dialogical part of the self (McAdams, 2001). In DST it is not only the I-positions that constitute the self, it is the dialogical relationship between them forming a complex narrative identity (Hermans, 2001; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). Culture provides people with the basis for their personal narrative structures, such as metaphors, story archetypes, people's own position in their self-story, or the narrative plot (McAdams, 2008). For example, several studies have found that North Americans tend to tell more self-focused memories compared to East Asians (Wang, 2001; see also McAdams, 2008). Similar to the nature of the self, the narrative structures of self are also dynamic and changeable over time (McAdams, 2008).

The narrative structures people develop during their childhood and use later in life for the construction of identity are influenced by the narrative structures presented to them in fictional narratives or literature (Ricoeur, 1992). For instance, Mar, Peskin & Fong (2010) argue that reading fiction allows adolescents to "reason about the whole lives of characters, giving them specific insight into an entire lifespan without having to fully lived most of their lives" (p.76). Fiction thereby can influence people's *suzjet* – the organization and form of their own narrative structures. This narrative organization underlies, for example, autobiographical reasoning, which is central to the narrative construction of identity (McAdams, 2001; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). By using narrative structures people also try to attribute meaning to the world around them, for example metaphors of life found in fiction are often used for the understanding of real-life complex organisational phenomena and experiences in the workplace (Cornelissen, 2005, Morgan, 1986).

One example of such a narrative impact is the redemptive story present in many American movies and books, such as the film The Pursuit of Happiness, where the main character faces several obstacles, but eventually he or she overcomes them and is a wiser, happier person. The redemption story is often used in personal narratives to structure negative events in such a way that they have a positive meaning: suffering will be redeemed

(McAdams, 2013). Another example is the search for 'true love' striving for a 'happily ever after' that encompasses a large part of American Hollywood movies (Illouz, 1997). When a single person is watching a romantic comedy, this will activate his or her search for one true love and this 'happily ever after', if this narrative is incorporated into one's I-positions.

The Reflective Pathway

The third pathway through which narrative fiction can influence the self is the reflective pathway: de-familiarisation or novelty of story elements and insight into story characters can put people in a meta-position. The meta-position is engaged in self-reflection and can be seen as an I-position that assumes a 'helicopter view' over the different domains and dynamics of the dialogue between different I-positions. The process of reflecting on the self from this meta-position has been conceptualized as the emergence of a dialogical space. Similar to Hermans (2014), the model in this chapter uses a semipermeable rectangular to represent this dialogical space:

"A dialogical space can be described as an invisible, in-between arena that has semipermeable boundaries with its surroundings. It emerges when participants are involved in interchanges in which experiences, insights and discoveries emerge that cannot be reduced to one or the other party, but are the result of the generative verbal and nonverbal dialogical process itself." (Hermans, 2014, p.146).

A dialogical space can be achieved in dialogue with other people, but it can also emerge as intrapersonal dialogue within one person (Hermans, 2014). Fictional narratives, and art at large, are likely promote this dialogical space, because stories stimulate imagination by offering people a safe arena to explore identity issues and possible lives (see also, Hermans, 2014). This chapter distinguishes between two changes that can be achieved via the reflective pathway. First, an increased self-awareness can be found through fictional experiences and, second, based on these insights people can actively adopt or create new I-positions to counteract dominant coalitions of self. The reflective pathway is most likely activated by complex literature and thought-provoking stories. In addition, this pathway can be linked to empirical studies showing that books can have counseling properties, such as bibliotherapy (MacCullis & Chaberlain, 2013) by, for example, relieving depressive symptoms in teenagers (Ackerson, Scogin, McKendree-Smith, 1998) and for group therapy and development of life skills in prisons (Billington, 2011; Waxler, 2008).

Increased Self-awareness

Literature and novel elements or ideas in narrative fiction can result in higher self-awareness (e.g. Fialho, 2012). When this self-reflective state occurs, the person resides in a meta-position, reflecting on several different I-positions and the relationship between these (Hermans, 2014). This happens when people, for example, read a book and suddenly see themselves in a different light, seeing I-positions or connections between I-positions they

were not aware of. This is most likely to happen when a story is complex or in some way challenging to the reader, such as in literary narratives (for a review see Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004) found for example that people experienced "self-modifying feelings" after reading literature, which describe a deeper or changed understanding of the self. They stressed, however, that such experiences do not occur in every reader, and among the readers who do experience this, this does not happen every time they read (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). The reflective pathway is therefore not commonplace.

There are competing views arguing either the objectivity of literary *textual features* independent of the reader (see Miall & Kuiken, 1994) or stipulating that reading *experience* defines what is literature across different readers (see Dixon, Bortolussi, Twilley and Leung, 1993). The model of this chapter accommodates the first view, recognizing that there are certain elements of texts that will more often activate self-reflection. However, it particularly stresses the second notion: which fictional narratives will induce self-reflection in a person will always partly depend on the person who experiences them.

What most conceptualisations of complex stories have in common is the notion of ambiguity that *defamiliarises* the reader: the reader is surprised by a novelty in the text, has to slow down and make conscious effort to interpret the text (for an overview see Miall & Kuiken, 1994). In foregrounding theory, the mechanism by which this is achieved is by "deviations from daily language" (Hakemulder, 2004, p.194). The ambiguity requires more mental effort, because the reader has to restructure story elements using problem solving skills and active refiguration (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992; Bal, 2009; Beach & Hynds, 1991).

Increased insight into the I-positions can be achieved when, for example, someone is reading the novella The Metamorphesis by Kafka. This literary classic tells the story of Gregor Samsa, who gradually transforms into a horrible insect-like creature. A large part of the story is about Gregors stay in his parents' house and his problematic relationship with his family, in particular his father. Perhaps this reader will recognize different parts of him or herself in the story in the different story characters: 'I feel trapped the situation Gregor is in, but I am also dominant towards others, similar to Gregor's father.' Being in a meta-position creates this overview over *several* I-positions. This is different to narrative impact via the personal route through which I-positions are added to the self, without a larger overview.

Looking for Alternative I-positions

In some instances, people will go beyond merely attaining an increased self-awareness, they will change their sense of self by trying to actively shift between I-positions, a state often found in successful counseling (Hermans, 2014). Several studies have shown that empathetic skills, such as perspective taking, can be promoted by literature reading (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Bal & Veltkamp, 2011). Whilst this skill can be used to understand

others, taking their perspective, it can be hypothesized that this mechanism could also increase perspective-taking of different positions within the self.

An example of this, also based on Kafka's Metamorphosis, can be found when the story helps the reader realize dominant I-positions in one situation and motivates him or her to replace them with other I-positions that are present in another context. A reader might think: In my job and work environment, I feel trapped like Gregor, which is related to dominant I-positions of 'me as fearful' and 'me as inferior'. How can I adopt the I-positions of 'me as brave' or 'me as open to new experiences' at work that are dominant when I travel?

Besides support by anecdotal accounts (e.g. Shirley, 1969), this type of change can be regarded as the rarest form of all changes mentioned in this chapter. It is plausible that for most people narrative impact like this can only be achieved with interpersonal dialogue, for example in a reading group or with a counselor who uses stories for active discussion.

Discussion

This chapter presented a model describing the processes that underlie narrative impact on the self through the lens of dialogical selves theory. There are some additional points regarding the presented model that should be addressed. First, even though narrative impact is often described as positive phenomenon, it is neither morally good nor bad. Via the personal pathway, for example, unachievable, unrealistic or even morally wrong role models or possible selves could influence people. The serial killer Dexter has for example inspired a 17-year old fan to murder his girlfriend based on his wish to be like Dexter (The Guardian, 2014; see also Donally, 2012). However, fictional narratives can also broaden the mind of the reader, listener of viewer, when people become transported into narrative worlds experiencing the lives of different people. This way, people can develop new possible selves countering stereotypes (Lockwood et al. 2002).

Second, narrative fiction may have an impact on people, but this does not necessarily challenge existing structures of the self or offer new insights. On a cultural level, stories compete for dominance (McAdams, 2008) and the most popular fictional narratives are often those that comply with the dominant culture, similar to the concept of power structures underlying discourse described by Foucault (2012). On an individual level, the reinforcing spirals framework (Slater, 2007) describes the impact of personal media selection to affirm and maintain people's social identity. It is important to address, that while all three pathways can introduce changes to identity, broadenings people's self- and world-image, the self-selection of affirming stories might also lead to the affirmation of the current self. Using Hermans' (2014) notion of centering and decentering movements of the society of I-positions, people might choose affirmative stories, because they promote centering movements in the

self, creating coherence and organization between I-positions (see Hermans, 2014). However, there is also ample empirical evidence showing stories can challenge people, even when these stories are self-selected (e.g. as in Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). The reflective pathway will most often promote decentering movements, but also novel role models (personal pathway) or stories that show counter-stereotypes (cultural pathway) can have the type of impact, which may cause initial chaos within the structure of I-positions. Similar to psychotherapy, new insights retrieved from a meta-position will eventually lead to new centering movements and a repositioned self.

Lastly, this chapter has not specifically elaborated on the influence of different types or forms of fictional narrative (such as movies or books) or individual differences (like openness to experience or reading habits) that influence narrative impact. Moreover, several hypothetical and empirical questions remain to be explored, for example regarding the most common I-positions that will be influenced by fictional narratives, or the influence of I-positions that specifically address fictional narrative experiences, such as 'me as a science fiction fan' or 'me as a reader of complex literature'.

Conclusion

This chapter proposed a theoretical model conceptualizing the influence of fictional narrative experience on the dialogical self. Three pathways were proposed through which narrative fiction can change people's identity: the personal pathway (through role models and possible selves), the cultural pathway (through narrative themes and narrative structures) and the reflective pathway (by increasing self-awareness and looking for alternative I-positions).

The objective of this chapter was to shed new light on the processes that underlie fictional narrative impact on identity. Several aspects of this topic remain to be empirically explored, but using a new paradigm to study this phenomenon - the concept of the Dialogical Self – can lead to new insights into the power of stories, a topic that is at the core of society and identity. In the words of American author Paul Auster (2010, p. 2), "human beings wouldn't be human without narrative fiction".

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