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Literature as An Instrument of Social Change: Exploring Gender Representation, Education and Psychological Empowerment

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Abstract

Literature is an important avenue through which to analyse social norms and values and challenge set gender roles and stereotypes. It is useful when reflecting on education and promoting equality and individual agency. Literature helps to broaden the frontiers of expectations. In this research study, we explore the relationship between literature and gender representation, education and psychological empowerment based on scholarly literature and a descriptive analysis of 201 reader responses. Our aim is to identify how individuals experience, read, assess, analyse, and interpret literature and to find how far fiction helps individuals to bond, be identified with, challenged, and experiment intellectually.

Differences in response to literature and in reading preferences were noted. Out of the 201 respondents, 157 were female and 44 were male. 24.2% of the female respondents reported being fiction-only readers, as compared to 9.1% of the male respondents. Most respondents were open to reading fiction and non-fiction. Women reported higher average literary self-assessments and rates of personal connection with novels as compared to men. Men reported slightly more challenge rates. In general, rates of intellectual engagement were higher than rates of personal identification.

This article further analyzes gender representations, narrative engagement, and critical literary education, based on previously published research (McCabe *et al.*, 2011; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013) ^[1]. Descriptive reading experiences reflect the role of literature in addressing social inequalities and in advocating social justice. They incorporate elements of psychological empowerment, and are critical of the social world to which individuals are exposed. The research supports inclusive literary representations, and engages critically with gender sensitive practices. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for discussion, and literary works that invite participants to engage critically, and reflectively, with social world that individual's experience, to be mentally and intellectually stimulated. Literature offers individuals the means to interrogate social expectations that restrain them, and to promote creativity and imagination in the construction of social transformations.

Keyword: Literature and Social Change, Gender Representation, Literary Education, Psychological Empowerment, Critical Literacy, Reader Engagement

1. Introduction

1.1 Literature, Norms, and Agency

Literary narratives are sites where social norms, expectations and implications are assigned characters, voices and consequences. Literary narratives can weave in and naturally modify social conventions that divide women's and men's lives. For example, the representation of reader gender is different from reader identity. In studies on children's literature, for example, the focus is on the visibility and centrality of female and male characters, not the gender identity of children who read the books. This distinction has importance in social change.

In educational settings, especially structured, the encounter with a narrative has a potential for interpretation, like when readers relate fictional characters to their own. Readers compare their lives to fictional characters and explore whom society has legitimized to dream and make decisions, what limits their choices and what options are available to them.

In terms of engaged reading, narrative transportation is one phenomenon, but such engagement does not guarantee deep learning, or positive behavioral changes (Green & Brock, 2000) ^[4]. In fact, efforts to repeat the effects of reading literary fiction in the social-cognitive domain have yielded inconsistent outcomes (Panero *et al.*, 2016) ^[12]. Therefore, critical reading should be viewed as a guided activity, rather than an automatic consequence of reading fiction.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Gender Representation and Literature as a Social Mirror

Representation means more than including male and female characters. It encompasses who leads, knows, enters public spaces, speaks, acts with autonomy, and makes meaningful choices. Balanced casts may still assign disproportionate initiative. Hamilton *et al.* (2006) ^[5], analyzing children's picture books, showed stereotyping and the underrepresentation of females. McCabe *et al.* (2011), analyzing children's books over a longer time period, also showed an underrepresentation of females. Therefore, counting characters is only the beginning of gender-sensitive analysis. Stories may challenge the status quo or may simply reflect it. Depictions of people engaged in various activities may reflect which practices and roles people in a society consider suitable for people of different genders. If gender stereotypes about intellectual abilities emerge early, these may affect interests, and therefore activities, of children. Stereotypes may affect expectations about what people of different genders may do. However, we cannot assume that stories pose ideas about gender stereotypes and impact them. It may simply show the state of things. Of course, throughout the course of literary analysis, we should pay attention to gender stereotypes related to specific beliefs, but also to the other beliefs embedded in the literary worlds. We should pay attention to the expectations about everyday life of the literary worlds, considering the contexts in which readers may encounter these worlds.

A practical critical method considers who makes the decisions that drive the plot, who can study or work, and whether characters are rewarded for conforming to gender expectations. It also considers narrative voice: Whose interiority is presented, whose is dismissed, and how are the constraints in a society treated: Naturally or as contestable? There are questions regarding how, in a novel, the education of a character changes the choices that are available to her, or how is opposition to an unjust custom presented? Readers' questions vary depending on the degree of critical alignment. Some interrogate resistance and irony; others endorse traditional roles and expectations; still others focus on characters that resist negatively. Due to differing degrees of education, experience and expectations, readers have differing opinions about literary judgement. Productive criticism does not insist on a single, predetermined opinion. The historical photograph below provides context for the participation of women, and other groups, in reading spaces. It does not show the respondents. It illustrates how using an Institutional space can support reading. Textual Representation, historical Participation, and Reader Responses are discretely different.



Source: Frances Benjamin Johnston; library of congress, prints and photographs division (public-domain historical photograph).

Source URL:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group_of_young_women_reading_in_library_of_normal_school,_Washington,_D.C._LCCN90711146.jpg

Fig 1: Women readers in a teacher-training college library, Washington, D.C. (1899)

Explanation: The relationship between women's educational participation and literacy is illustrated by this 1899 photograph of women reading in a teacher-training college library. The photo is contextual visual evidence, and is not a representation of the participants surveyed, nor is it direct evidence of psychological empowerment.

2.2 Literary Education, Identification, and Psychological Empowerment

Narrative engagement may make imagined situations emotionally salient. Green and Brock (2000) ^[4] describe transportation as being caught up in a story. Mar *et al.* (2009) ^[9] focus on the relationship between fiction reading and empathy. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) ^[1] investigate the role of emotional transportation in relation to the effects of fiction on empathy. Another study (Kidd & Castano, 2013) ^[7] reported immediate theory-of-mind benefits after reading literary fiction, while a second study (Panero *et al.*, 2016) ^[12] found no such benefits.

Habitual ways of thinking may also be altered due to differences in literary styles. Miall and Kuiken (1994) ^[11] connected foregrounding and defamiliarization to emotional responses, noting how unusual or different language can challenge typical ways of thinking and help people understand in new ways. Djikic *et al.* (2009) ^[3] examined the self-related changes fiction reading may induce. Although reflection does not always result in changes to our opportunities, behavior or institutions, how we read, what we read, and how we talk about it may still be critical.

Compared to the other measures, psychological empowerment is more demanding. Kabeer (1999) ^[6] defined empowerment in terms of resources, agency and accomplishments, highlighting the capacity to make consequential decisions in the presence of social constraints. Psychological empowerment has also been defined as multidimensional and context-sensitive and not amenable to a single positive attitude (Zimmerman, 1995) ^[13]. Educational literature may clarify alternatives, but empowerment requires measures of control or actions, e.g. participation, choice, decision-making or involvement.

The current reader items must therefore be interpreted as written. Agreeing that novels are relevant to one's life means perceiving novels as personally meaningful; reading for intellectual challenge means reporting a motivation to read novels. Neither of these define, or measure, the quality of representation of gender within novels, nor are they validated measures of empowerment. This separation means literary criticism can inform the interpretation of the survey items without crossing the evidence threshold defined by the survey.

3. Research Aims and Questions and Objectives

3.1 Research Aims

The study aims to integrate studies on gendered representation and reflective reading with a known sample of readers' self-reported data. First, it analyzes narratives in terms of how they reflect or resist expectations regarding voice, ability, education, and choice (McCabe *et al.*, 2011). Second, it analyzes differences in reading by gender and respondents' education levels. Finally, it disentangles engagement from empowerment by means of agency and opportunity (Kabeer, 1999) ^[6].

3.2 Research Objectives

- To analyze how literature portrayals of gender and personal agency endorse or challenge social norms.
- To describe preferences for particular genres of literature and to rate themselves as readers among 201 respondents, based on gender and educational levels.
- To compare readers' identification with novels and their motivation for intellectual challenge across gender groups.
- To analyze the relation between reading engagement and psychological empowerment or social change, in view of gender sensitivity in literary education.

3.3 Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How does published research indicate that gendered literary representation impacts the reinforcement or subversion of social expectations?
- **RQ2:** How do reported choices of genre, identification with novels, and intellectual engagement vary across groups differently in terms of gender?
- **RQ3:** What educational practices are implied by these observations? Also, what arguments concerning agency or empowerment are unable to be validated by these data? These questions help distinguish between theory, observations and outcomes that are beyond the scope of observation. Answers to each question should be limited to the evidence that is appropriate to the question.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Survey Source, Participants, and Variables

The analysis uses 201 complete cases with nine variables: Respondent identifier, gender, age, education, annual books read, reading genre, literary self-rating, relation of novels to personal life, and motivation to read for intellectual challenge. All nine variables were complete for each case. Respondent identifiers were not analyzed. Undocumented processes include recruitment, dates, location, sampling, consent, and ethical review. The sample cannot be presumed random or representative.

The sample composition includes 157 females and 44 males. Age is reported in years. Respondents reported their annual book reading. Education is reported at six levels: High school, community college, college, graduate school, vocational training, and vocational training (theoretical/mixed). The two largest levels were college (76) and graduate school (68). Reading genre is reported as fiction only or fiction and nonfiction. Literary self-rating is reported using a seven-point scale. Relatedness of the novel to the individual's life and motivation to read for intellectual challenge is reported using a five-point scale. The education categories in the analysis are not progressive levels of the same educational scale. So their distribution should not be interpreted to represent a progressive scale of literary capability.

Table 1: Selected respondent characteristics and reading habits (N=201)

Characteristic	Category	N (%)
Gender	Female	157 (78.1%)
Gender	Male	44 (21.9%)
Typical reading	Fiction only	42 (20.9%)
Typical reading	Fiction and non-fiction	159 (79.1%)
Education	College	76 (37.8%)
Education	Graduate school	68 (33.8%)

Explanation: The sample contains 201 complete responses. More females than male's respondents are represented in the sample. The preference for fiction and non-fiction is strong. Education is represented by the largest number of responses, followed by years of working experience. Other categories vary by respondent characteristics. Differences in gender and education exclude comparability. Educational differences may coincide with access, instruction and preference. Research related to the exposure to fiction and the development of social skills indicates the importance of measurement and individual differences (Mar *et al.*, 2006) ^[8].

4.2 Descriptive Analysis, Interpretive Approach, and Safeguards

Counts and percentages were calculated for respondent characteristics and typical reading genre. Comparisons by gender use the percentage of the gender category as the denominator, rather than the total of 201 participants, for each genre. Mean ratings summarize the 7-point literary self-rating and each of the 5-point response items. Frequency distributions for the five responses to the items about the degree of relatedness of novel characters to people in real life, and the degree of intellectual challenge offered by novels, retained all five responses and used the 201-person total as their basis, thus maintaining the difference in the response scales.

One-decimal percentages and two-decimal means were used to present round-off values. Differences in results, compared to unrounded values, may occur. No inferential significance tests were performed. The sample selection process is unknown; the gender groups are unequal; age and education may be related to report reading preferences, and formal testing could misleadingly suggest an assumption about the population. It is, therefore, warranted to maintain a descriptive framework for the analysis, and report differences in responses as characteristics of the sample, rather than effects of gender. Education categories are maintained as reported; especially small cells are not treated as bases for ranking or generalization.

Interpretation is based on synthesis of studies regarding representation, transportation, reader response and empowerment. Published studies' book-level evidence is kept distinct from survey evidence: no novels were coded as a character role or narrative voice in this research. Related experimental literature is discussed, focusing on limits of interpretation and replication (Panero *et al.*, 2016) ^[12]. Similarly, for this study, resource based and psychological definitions of empowerment are used for concepts, not to measure empowerment (Kabeer, 1999) ^[6].

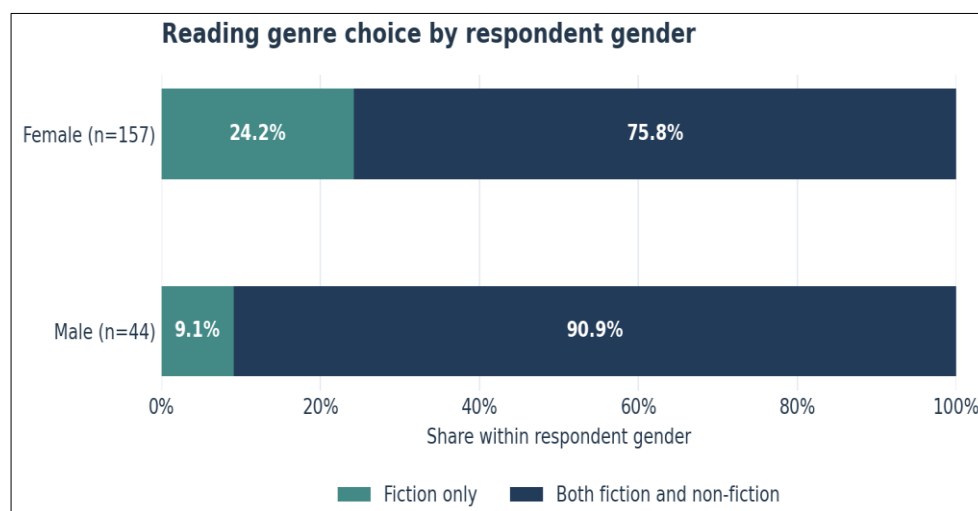
For reporting, all Exhibits and summaries were stripped of identifiers. Because procedure for provenance and permission are not defined in the available data, the analysis is limited to identifying and reporting patterns. Thus, reporting is constrained to publish aggregate observations.

5. Results and Descriptive Analysis

5.1 Participant Reading Patterns by Gender

The 201 respondents consist of 157 women (78.1%) and 44 men (21.9%). Of the total sample, 159 participants (79.1%) indicated that they read both fiction and nonfiction, while 42 (20.9%) indicated reading fiction only. The names of the books/authors were not provided; therefore, absolute comparisons are not relevant. However, relative comparisons are valid within each group. The 42 fiction-only respondents, 38 are women. This partly reflects women being the larger population among respondents. To negate this compositional effect, descriptions should be framed conditional to reading habits.

Of the 157 women, 38 (24.2%) indicated reading fiction only, and 119 (75.8%) indicated reading both fiction and nonfiction. Of the 44 men, 4 (9.1%) indicated reading fiction only, and 40 (90.9%) indicated reading both fiction and nonfiction. It can be reasonably assumed that among women in the sample, fiction-only reading is somewhat dominant, compared to men. Combined fiction and nonfiction reading, however, was the case with the larger population. Descriptions of graph one show the conditional percentages with group denominator figures represented next to the bars. These figures do not represent general preferences or prove reading skills.



Source: Reader responses, "Raw Responses"; percent denominators: Female N=157, Male N=44.

Graph 1: Reading genre choice by respondent gender

Explanation: Among female respondents, 24.2% report fiction-only reading. Among male respondents, this number is 9.1%. The graph doesn't represent gender distribution in literature and focuses on preference of genre in the sample represented.

Different kinds of reading may build awareness and engagement with varying perspectives. Genre alone is not enough to measure stereotype awareness. Nor can we conclude that those who only read fiction encounter representations that are emancipatory or restrictive. What a text is about, how it is interpreted, and whether it is persuasive are unknown in these records.

Research on the relation between fiction exposure and social cognition suggests that reading categories must not be interchanged with psychological outcomes (Mar *et al.*, 2006) [8]. Therefore, the current comparison is best described as a reading access and self-classification profile. It is a first step in determining whether different educational settings stimulate varying kinds of reading, and should not be used to substantiate the claim that in terms of gender equality, the preference for a particular genre predominates in a given group. Reading both genres is by far the most prevalent in all groups.

5.2 Readers' Identification and Intellectual Engagement

The respondent ratings cover various aspects of the literary experience. For this sample, mean literary self ratings of 3.10 (7-point scale) were reported by women, mean novel-life relatedness of 2.89 (5-point scale) and mean intellectual challenge of 3.58 (5-point scale) were also reported. The mean rating for men were 2.55, 2.34 and 3.73. Therefore, for this sample, women reported a higher average self-rating and relatedness, while for men a modestly higher average rating of intellectual challenge was reported. Table 2 retains the distinct scale labels to discourage comparisons which treat the three means as equivalent.

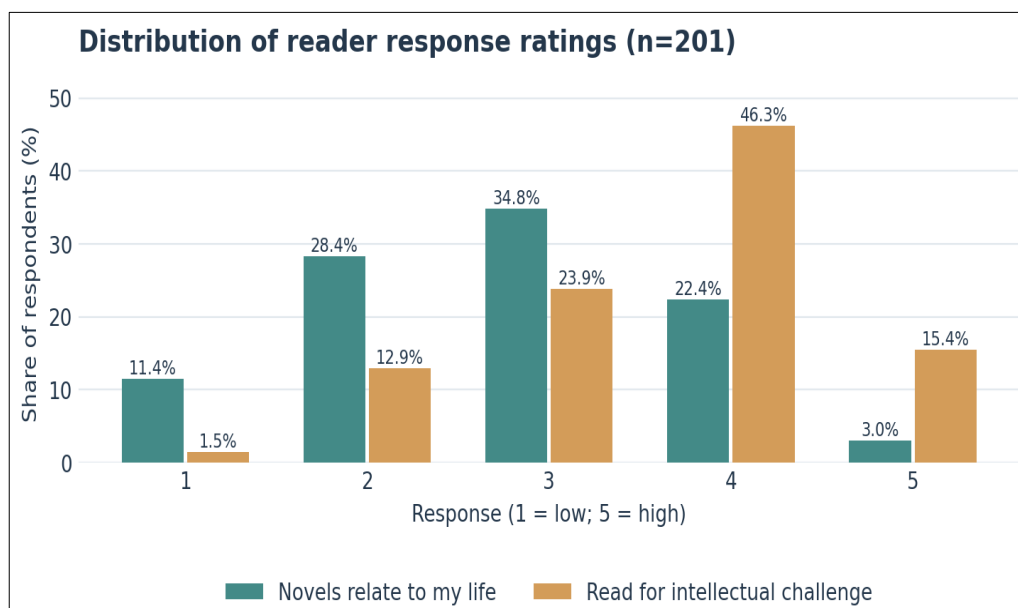
Table 2: Literary experience ratings by respondent gender

Gender (N)	Literary self-rating ¹	Novel-life relatedness ²	Intellectual challenge ²
Female (157)	3.10	2.89	3.58
Male (44)	2.55	2.34	3.73

Note: ¹ = seven-point scale; ² = five-point scale.

Explanation: Women say they are slightly more literary and say their reading is more related to their lives. Men say they get more of an intellectual challenge. Self-ratings vary as expected, and 'related to their lives' is rather vague.

From the sample, 70 people picked 3 of 5 for novel-life relatedness, making it the most selected response. For intellectual challenge, 93 people picked 4 of 5 as the response, making it the most selected response. The distribution in Graph 2 indicates a higher clustering of intellectual challenge ratings in the upper response categories. At the endpoints, 31 participants picked the highest intellectual challenge rating, whereas 3 participants picked the lowest rating. Conversely, six participants picked the highest relatedness rating, and 23 picked the lowest rating. These counts support the distributional description. Particularly, 124 participants picked 4 or 5 for intellectual challenge, and compared with this, 51 picked 4 or 5 for relatedness for novel-life. Reading can feel stimulating without strong personal identification.



Source: Reader responses, "Raw Responses"; all rating categories use N = 201

Graph 2: Distribution of novel-life relatedness and intellectual-challenge ratings

Explanation: Clusters for intellectual challenge tend to be 4 and 5. In terms of personal identification, they tend to be 2 to 4. These self reports tend to reflect an individual's reading orientation and not a validated empowerment outcome or behavior change.

These two items report different kinds of experiences. A story can stimulate a reader's intellect without mirroring that reader's environment or experience; also relatable characters do not produce introspection. This is informed by Engagement theory. Ratings do not measure empathy, attitude change or empowerment (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013) [1]. Also, one cannot determine with certainty that a particular text caused greater curiosity or engagement based on the difference between means.

Educational categories need to be similarly restricted. The group recorded as 'vocational training' contains only two members, while the other, 'theoretical/mixed vocational' category, contains nine. Such small groups do not allow for persuasive education-group rankings. Differences in the samples could be due to background, age, prior experiences, genre or selection. Future research could collect more extensive and detailed histories, larger samples or subgroups, in order to determine if engagement with certain

literary works produce particular forms of identification, comprehension, and/or action. Currently the main value of the research is to illustrate how these respondents analyze their reading experiences.

6. Discussion

6.1 From Literary Encounter to Potential Social Reflection

The results largely differentiate reading from social impact. Respondents report reading both fiction and nonfiction, and intellectual challenge gets a higher average than novel-life relatedness. The results are consistent with a view of reading as a window onto new experiences, but do not suggest the texts read were of the sort that would modify respondents' beliefs about gender.

Narrative transportation and fiction-related empathy are useful models primarily because they describe a process worth examining, not because they prove an outcome (Green & Brock, 2000; Mar, *et al.*, 2009) ^[4,9].

While there is an active empirical debate about brief literary fiction interventions, Kidd and Castano (2013) ^[7] reported a short-term improvement on a theory of mind task after a 15-minute literary fiction intervention. A subsequent replication study did not find an improvement on the task (Panero *et al.* 2016) ^[12]. No study has provided evidence of reading literary fiction as an intervention to promote egalitarian values. In education, it is more prudent to integrate repeated reading interventions, dialogue and analysis to help students move beyond affirming their existing beliefs about gender, and assess students' progress over time to check for understanding of texts.

Representation scholarship provides further evidence. McCabe *et al.* (2011) and Hamilton *et al.* (2006) ^[5] studied the representation of social roles in literature. By contrast, the results reported here are based on gendered self-reports of readers. It is a logical fallacy to go from the larger female proportion of self-reported readers here to the conclusion that the novels read endorse female values. It is also a logical fallacy to conclude that people reported identifying with novels that align with their values and beliefs to mean they read a novel that refutes discriminatory beliefs.

The conceptual stakes of psychological empowerment are equally as important. Kabeer (1999) ^[6] perceives expanded choice as the accumulation of resources, agency, and achievements. Zimmerman (1995) ^[13] leans toward context and the different dimensions of perceived control and participation. An individual who seeks out challenging readings may be motivated and reflective, perhaps even inspired to consider social structures, without experiencing greater decision-making power. Recognizing the struggles of a character may develop a person's vocabulary around social injustice, and this may, in theory, affect a person's self-efficacy around social injustice, but there may be other factors at play. Measuring the effects of empowerment would require a different set of tools and a framework capable of tracking this type of change.

7. Educational and Societal Implications

Taking the opportunity and consequences for characters of different genders as a point of departure for critical discussion around gender can mean asking who can speak in public, who gets educated, who gets to choose their profession, who can escape their family obligations, what are the consequences of children acting according to gender norms, what are the consequences of acting against gender norms, and so on. Such discussion are well contextualized in light of literature that describes gender-based character gaps and research that describe early gender-based stereotypes and early beliefs about children's intellectual ability (McCabe *et al.*, 2011; Bian *et al.* 2017) ^[2].

Other kinds of literature can be helpful in this regard as well. One can teach students to assess social claims by looking at various forms of literature and explore socially engaged art (Fung, 2008). Teachers can foreground various texts and help students listen to various kinds of voices, including emotionally engaging literature in ways that help students answer the questions they have about character's circumstances (Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013) ^[11,1].

Neither of the abovementioned activities should be presented as an evidence-based, guaranteed strategy. Not all education programs based on empowerment and listening to dissenting voices aim to enhance self-efficacy, access, agency and participation. Both outcomes and means need to be evaluated carefully (Kabeer, 1999; Zimmerman, 1995) ^[6,13]. Such concerns are important to keep in mind when trying to determine whether and how literary discussions can help different social advocacy goals and provide tools for raising critical questions, particularly considering the commitment by many programs to empowerment and listening to dissent (respectful disagreement).

8. Study Limitations and Future Directions

There are several notable limitations to the evidence. Participant selection and location are unknown. The group sizes for education vary widely. The total number of books read is reported as being between two and 300. This heterogeneity points to the uncertainty of self-reported measures. The records are cross-sectional, and therefore cannot show cause and effect or temporal sequence. Respondents did not indicate which books were represented or taught, or how participants changed, adapted, or learned. Neither perceived relevance nor intellectual challenge is a validated measure of agency, control, self-efficacy or psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995) ^[13]. Future studies may combine research on characters' voice with more refined, validated measures of self, control, agency and empowerment with larger, more varied samples and true classroom interventions to investigate teaching practices for effects on interpretation, and to assess potential impacts on action. Further, to examine replication concerns, future studies may predefine outcomes and make methods more transparent (Panero *et al.*, 2016) ^[12]. These would test the potential impacts this exploratory profile motivates.

9. Conclusion

Literature can make assumptions about gender, education, and social standing visible by giving readers access to alternative lives and contested choices. Representation studies document uneven literary authority, while reader-response research suggests paths to reflection (McCabe *et al.*, 2011; Djikic *et al.*, 2009) ^[3]. Educational discussion can help readers scrutinize those routes rather than accepting every portrayal uncritically.

The present analysis offers a more limited empirical conclusion. Among 201 respondents, most read both fiction and non-fiction; fiction-only reporting varies descriptively by respondent gender; and intellectual challenge is rated more highly than personal relatedness to novels. These are self-reported orientations, not measures of textual gender equality, acquired educational opportunity, changed behavior, or empowerment. The contribution is this distinction and a research agenda. Future work should carefully study representations within actual texts, observe interpretive teaching practices, and assess agency with measures suited to the social settings in which readers make choices. Only then can literature's contribution to social change be evaluated with appropriate precision

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