CAROLINE KUTSCH

"It's Fun Escaping into a Different World and Having Your Own Experiences:" A Qualitative Interview Study on the Dimensions of Experientiality During Reading

Introduction

Anyone who engages with fictional narratives on a more or less regular basis is familiar with what reading stories can do for and to them: you get transported into different worlds, you lose track of your surroundings (and might even miss your stop, as I recently did because of a particularly gripping novel), you start thinking about yourself and the world at large, and from time to time, you even learn something for the future. While these are only a few examples of what might happen during the reading process, it quickly becomes clear that narratives can evoke a vast array of experiences in their readers. This phenomenon has been studied under the name experientiality in (cognitive) literary studies for the past two decades, during which it has undergone an interesting theoretical shift (for a detailed account, see Caracciolo's online entry on experientiality in The Living Handbook of Narratology; also Kutsch and Strasen 2019). The focus has shifted from the experiences that fictional characters undergo in the course of a narrative (Fludernik 1996) to those that readers undergo in the reading process. Marco Caracciolo defines experientiality as the impact that reading a narrative has on its readers:

All narratives are steeped in experience, but only some of them can bring about an effect on us – or, as I will say, have the capacity to restructure our experiential background. Experientiality becomes, then, a matter of degree: it depends on the strength of the 'impact' a story has on its producers and recipients. (Caracciolo 2012, 181)

When reading narrative texts, he maintains, readers undergo actual experiences – which he calls story-driven experiences1 – through the impact of the activation of what he calls the readers' experiential backgrounds, i.e. their past experiences on different levels (Caracciolo 2014a, 5), and in their interplay with certain text features and structures (expressive devices, 41-44) of the narrative as well as through the fact that readers attribute consciousness to fictional characters and then (partially) enact it. Furthermore, he defines experientiality "as the sum of all possible story-driven experiences" (50):

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1 In the call for participants as well as during the interview sessions, the term 'reading experiences' was used to avoid confusing the interviewees or steering them in the direction of considering story world or plot-related experiences only (Caracciolo, of course, uses the term 'story-driven' to refer to all experiences evoked when reading a story). Consequently, I use both terms interchangeably in this article as well.
Whereas the story-driven experience is created by the interaction between the story and the experiential background of an individual recipient, experientiality is a broader concept. It refers to the capacity of a story to tap into – and have a feedback effect on – the background of different recipients. (2014, 50; original emphasis)

Every reader, then, has their individual set of story-driven experiences when reading a fictional narrative (although it can be assumed, at least to a certain degree, that readers with a similar cultural background undergo similar experiences – this is the basis for meaningful empirical investigation of the phenomenon), and all possible story-driven experiences of all possible readers constitute experientiality in Caracciolo's sense.

In his discussion of the concept of the experiential background, Caracciolo distinguishes between five different layers or regions of it: bodily experiences at the center, perceptions, emotions, higher-order cognitive functions, and finally, socio-cultural practices. Caracciolo places the region of bodily experiences at the heart of the experiential background in order to highlight its crucial importance for all five regions. The concept of embodiment permeates the experiential background on all its levels because "not only mental processes are made possible by our body, but […] the structure of our body has a profound influence on the way we perceive, feel, and think about the world" (2014a, 58). The second region of the experiential background, perception, is so closely related to bodily experience that Caracciolo often subsumes them under one category – bodily-perceptual experience (2014a, 59). The close connection between the two regions is two-sided as well: On the one hand, human beings can only perceive because of their sense organs and nervous systems; on the other hand, as put forward by enactivism, perception is inherently embodied – "an active exploration of the world that relies primarily on bodily movements" (ibid.).

The importance of embodiment also becomes obvious on the next level of the background, emotions. Caracciolo defines emotions as "means of expressing one's experience that precede language both phylogenetically and ontogenetically" (ibid.) – they are expressed by means of our bodies, especially (but not exclusively) via facial expressions. The penultimate region, higher-order cognitive functions, consists in "abilities such as long-term memory, propositional imagination, conceptual thought, language, and narrative understanding" (ibid.). Even though both, these abilities and the socio-cultural practices encompassed by the last circle, are, according to Caracciolo, not in themselves experiential, they are just as crucial for the experiential background and its role in the creation of story-driven experiences: "they are integral to people's background assumptions about what humans can do – and they shape in crucial ways their engagement with the world" (2014a, 60).

When taking a closer look at Caracciolo's account of experientiality as a dynamic network, it becomes clear that further theoretical work is necessary to build on Caracciolo's before experientiality becomes a construct that can fruitfully be

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2 In order to use gender-inclusive language and also maintain the anonymity of the participants in the study, I am using the pronouns they/them/their with singular forms throughout this article.
investigated from an empirical perspective. Several questions arise out of the theoretical considerations outlined above: What do story-driven experiences actually consist of? Which different kinds of experiences do real readers actually undergo when they read? What are the dimensions of experientiality? Which role does the experiential background play and which regions of it are activated? Which textual features are responsible for the evocation of experientiality? I decided on first attempting to shed light on the different dimensions of experientiality as a basis for future research, since the construct cannot fruitfully be operationalized without it. In other words, an investigation of the expressive devices that are evocative of experientiality is pointless as long as it remains unclear what experientiality even is. Consequently, the study presented here aims at finding answers to the first four closely-related questions by exploring readers' story-driven experiences through in-depth semi-structured interviews. In The Experientiality of Narrative, Caracciolo himself briefly suggests that story-driven experiences [...] can be produced at different – but interrelated – levels of experience. At the perceptual level, stories can evoke vivid mental imagery, turning our sketchy imaginings into memorable, and sometimes unsettling, sensory experiences. At the emotional level, narratives can provoke emotional reactivity: for example, watching a film may make us cry because we (more or less consciously) recognize the film as dealing with values that are part of our own experiential background. Finally, engaging with a narrative can leave a mark on readers at the level of their more self-conscious – and culturally mediated – judgements about the world. (2014a, 5; my emphases)

A small-scale pilot study which I carried out with twelve participants in 2018 showed that readers indeed report on mental imagery, on empathic reactions to the characters in a story world, and on being reminded of experiences from their past. However, when taking a closer look at the quotation above, the four dimensions of a closely-related phenomenon from cognitive and empirical literary studies quickly come to mind: story world absorption (e.g. Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000; Kuijpers et al. 2014). Having been studied extensively (theoretically as well as empirically), story world absorption can be defined as

[...] an experiential state that can emerge during the reading of a narrative text. This state is characterized by a reader's focused attention on the story world presented in the text, as a consequence of which readers become less aware of their surroundings and themselves and lose track of time. During this kind of experience, they can feel transported to the world of the story and this feeling can be supported by strong emotional reactions to what happens in the story world and by mental imagery they generate. (Kuijpers et al. 2017, 34)

Set apart from other, more general absorbing experiences such as flow or immersion (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Ryan 2001), story world absorption denotes a phenomenon which happens when engaging with narratives. As stated in the quote above, story world absorption comprises four dimensions: attention, mental imagery, emotional engagement, and transportation (e.g., Kuijpers 2014; Kuijpers et al. 2014; 3 See Kutsch and Strasen (2019, 73) for my first sketch of a revised model of experientiality.
for a detailed account of the relationship of transportation as one dimension of story world absorption to similar concepts such as Green and Brock's (2000)). Comparing the dimensions of story world absorption with Caracciolo's tentative suggestions and the readers' reports in the aforementioned pilot study, the strong overlap becomes obvious. It seems like two types of story-driven experiences, mental imagery and emotional engagement, could also be considered dimensions of Kuijpers and colleagues' concept of story world absorption. Consequently, there must be a close relationship between the two concepts. As a result of these conceptual overlaps, a second set of possible research questions comes to mind: What exactly is the relationship between experientiality and story world absorption? How can both constructs be fruitfully integrated? Could experientiality be another dimension of story world absorption; or, in turn, could story world absorption be conceptualized as a dimension of experientiality?

These theoretical considerations and the resulting questions constituted the starting point for the study presented here. However, the empirical research I carried out was of an exploratory nature: I aimed at exploring the concept of experientiality. Thus, instead of developing fully-fledged hypotheses to test in a reading experiment (though I suspected story world absorption and its dimensions would come up in the readers' reports, at least to a certain degree), I chose a qualitative approach in order to collect first evidence and then work towards answering the following research questions:

1) Which kinds of story-driven experiences do flesh-and-blood readers actually report on when asked about their readings of fictional narratives?
2) Are experientiality and story world absorption related phenomena, and if so, in what way(s) are they related?

**Method**

The study presented here aimed at exploring the concept of experientiality and the different kinds of story-driven experiences readers may undergo when reading fictional narratives.\(^4\) To this end, several semi-structured interviews in which the participants were asked to talk about their reading experiences were conducted. The study was developed and carried out with the help of two M.A. students\(^5\) at RWTH Aachen University, who participated in a course, the aim of which was to combine the teaching of empirical methods in literary studies and linguistics with students' active participation in actual research projects at the Department of English, American and Romance Studies. In a first step, we developed the interview protocol of the study, which was largely adapted from the study by Katalin Bálint et al. (2016) on recipients' experiences of foregrounding. Subsequently, we carried out three trial interviews –

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\(^4\) The theoretical considerations and method of this study are described in Alber, Kutsch, and Strasen (forthcoming). The present paper further elaborates and presents the results of the study.

\(^5\) I would like to thank Ariane Dieter and Julie Broichhausen for their participation in this research project.
one by each of the M.A. students and one by me – in order to test the intelligibility and order of the interview questions and prompts as well as their effectiveness in eliciting readers' statements. Furthermore, the trial interviews were useful for coordinating our behavior as interviewers to ensure collecting interview data of the highest quality possible. After the trials, we transcribed these interviews and extensively discussed our interviewing experiences, the transcripts and the feedback we had received from the three interviewees in order to optimize the interview procedure and our behavior as interviewers. Based on our analysis of the trials, we adapted the research protocol by changing the phrasing of questions the participants had considered unclear. Furthermore, the order of the questions was slightly changed in order to avoid confusing the interviewees. Finally, one pilot interview was carried out in order to test the adapted interview protocol under the same conditions as the actual interviews. Once again, the pilot interview was transcribed and discussed within our team before starting with the main interviews. The interview sessions then lasted around 60 to 90 minutes per participant and were carried out either in my office or in the interviewees' homes in order to guarantee a comfortable and quiet environment for them.

The M.A. students were not only involved in developing the interview; they also conducted several interviews, transcribed those, and analyzed the interview data to derive different categories of story-driven experiences.

Participants

In total, sixteen people participated in our interview study (thirteen female). Unfortunately, due to problems with the recording device, one voice recording was lost, which led to our decision to delete this participant's data set completely. The age of the remaining fifteen participants (twelve of whom were female) ranged between eighteen and 51 years; the mean age was 26.9 years (SD = 10.2). Although all participants were non-native speakers of English, they were fluent enough so that expressing themselves in English during the interview was not an issue. Two thirds of the participants had an educational background in literature, i.e., they were either currently students of literary studies, students training to be teachers, or teachers already working in secondary schools.

Following Bálint et al. (2016), we selected our participants through purposive sampling (e.g., Charmaz 2014; Payne 2007), "a frequently used type of non-probability sampling when investigating the experience of a specific construct" (Bálint et al. 2016, 182). We decided to adopt Bálint and colleagues' sampling method, since it allowed us to collect as much qualitative data on readers' story-driven experiences as possible. We distributed a call for participants amongst the students of the department as well as through our own social networks which stated that we were looking for participants who 1) were willing to answer a few questions about their reading experiences, 2) were avid readers and enjoyed reading fictional narratives, 3) would be able to read in English without difficulties during the interview session, and 4) were able to speak English well enough so that they could express themselves. Criterion 2) was included in the call for participants because we assumed that avid
readers of fiction would be especially interested in talking about their reading and that they would have a particularly vast array of reading experiences to report on. That way, we could collect more data than would have been possible with infrequent readers. Criteria 3) and 4) were included because the study was carried out at the Chair of British Literature and thus with source material in English, but in a German-speaking context and with non-native speakers of English.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the method of purposive sampling does not allow for generalizing beyond our sample. However, the interview study was of an exploratory nature, i.e. aimed at finding first evidence for different dimensions of experientiality.

Materials

Before their interviews, participants were asked to hand in a list of five stories that they had had the most intense reading experiences with. We did not specify the term "intense" any further and none of the participants contacted us for clarification. Furthermore, we added an explanation that these stories did not have to be written or read in English; rather, the participants should simply be able to talk about them in English. Thus, we gave them the opportunity to pick any fictional narrative that they had had an intense experience with – no matter what 'intense' meant for them individually. Once we had received the participants' lists, we instructed them to choose one of the five stories and bring a copy of it to the interview session. All fifteen participants handed in their lists in time and succeeded in bringing one story. These instructions were given for two reasons: on the one hand, we used the chosen story to discuss the interviewees' reading experiences while reading it in order to collect as much data as possible, since we assumed that they would be particularly open to discuss a narrative that they themselves considered to be 'intense'; on the other hand, asking them to hand in longer lists of stories allowed us to compile a corpus of fictional narratives that flesh-and-blood readers thought of as experientially rich. This corpus could be used in future empirical research.

During the interview, we did not only talk about their pre-selected story; we also asked them to read the two short stories "The Trout" (1957 [1945]) by Sean O'Faolain and "The Story of an Hour" (1991 [1894]) by Kate Chopin, to discuss their reading experiences immediately afterwards. Because of the recency of these experiences, we hoped our participants would be able to recall and describe as many of them in as much detail as possible. Finally, we asked them to underline those passages in the printed copies of these stories that had evoked story-driven experiences for them and to write down in the margin what these had consisted of. We chose "The Trout" and "The Story of an Hour" for several reasons: when developing the interview study, I used Twitter to ask social media users to name short stories that had caused intense reading experiences for them in the past and both stories were mentioned multiple times. Furthermore, these fictional narratives had been successfully used as stimulus material in empirical reader response research before (e.g., Miall and Kuiken 1994; 1995), which is why I
considered them an appropriate and stimulating source for discussing reading experiences.

Procedure

After receiving the instructions to pick one of their five listed fictional narratives and bring it to the interview, the fifteen participants were individually interviewed in one interview session that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. The interviews were carried out by me and the two M.A. students, so that each interviewer was responsible for five interviews in total.

Every interview session began with the interviewer welcoming the participant before they received a short introduction, signed an informed consent form and were given the chance to ask any question they still had. The actual interview then began with a few questions about the interviewee's general reading habits and preferences to allow them to get comfortable and acquainted with the situation. With a first set of questions and prompts, the focus of the interview then turned to the story the participant had brought to the interview (see questions 4-8 from the interview protocol, table 1). As already mentioned, these questions were adapted from the study by Bálint et al. (2016) on recipients' experiences of foregrounding in written texts and films: some questions were directly adopted (e.g. "Which moment in the story was the most important for you?"), some became additional prompts rather than questions in their own right (e.g. "What was going on in your mind?"), and we changed the phrasing of some questions the participants in our trial sessions had described as "unclear" or "confusing" (see Bálint et al. [2016, 183] for a detailed comparison). The intention of adapting the interview protocol was discussed with Katalin Bálint, who also kindly provided feedback on our adapted protocol. In most of the interviews, the majority of the prompts (marked in italics, a)-e) in the protocol) were used to keep the conversation going and to elicit further responses from the participants.

Questions about general reading habits and preferences
1. What do you like to read?
2. How often do you like to read?
3. What do you like about reading?

Questions about the pre-selected story
4. What are your reasons for choosing this story?
5. What is this story about?
6. What did you experience while you were reading this story?
   a) What was going on in your mind?
   b) What did you think?
   c) What was happening in your body?
   d) What did you feel?
   e) Anything else?
7. Which aspects of the whole story made you experience these things?
   a) What was it with regard to the events of the story?
   b) What was it with regard to the characters of the story?
   c) What was it with regard to the structure of the story?
d) What was it with regard to the style of the story?
e) Anything else?

8. Which moment in the story was the most important to you and what did you experience while reading it?
   a) What was going on in your mind?
   b) What did you think?
   c) What was happening in your body?
   d) What did you feel?
   e) Anything else?

Reading the first short story and then discussing it

9.-12. Repetition of the questions and prompts 5.-8.

Going back to the story and underlining passages that evoked experiences

Reading the second short story and then discussing it


Going back to the story and underlining passages that evoked experiences

17. Which of the two short stories did you like more and why?

18. Could you please state your age, gender, and educational background?

Table 1: Interview protocol of the study

As can be seen in table 1, after the set of questions with regard to the pre-selected narrative, the participant was given the first piece of stimulus material to read (we varied the order of "The Story of an Hour" and "The Trout" in each interview). They were instructed to read the story as naturally and comfortably as possible and at their own pace. The interviewer then left to give them privacy. We decided on this procedure so that the participant's reading would come as close to their natural reading habits as possible in the context of an empirical study. In other words, their reading experiences should be as authentic as possible. After the participant had finished reading, we asked them the same set of questions (and, where necessary, prompts) about the short story in order to elicit accounts of their story-driven experiences directly after reading. In a last step, the participant was asked to, once again, go through the text and underline words and passages that had evoked experiences for them and to write down what these experiences had consisted of (see, for example, Koopman's [2016] use of underlining). We decided on making use of underlining for two reasons: on the one hand, it gave the participant the possibility to go over the text a second time and potentially recall further experiences that had not come up yet; on the other hand, locating reading experiences in the texts also provides a source to generate first hypotheses concerning those features of narrative that Caracciolo calls expressive devices (2014a, 41-44).

Finally, in a third part, the participant was given the second piece of stimulus material and the interview procedure (reading, answering the same set of questions and prompts, underlining in the text) was repeated. The interview was concluded by asking the participant which of the two stories they had preferred and why, and with a
question about their age, gender and educational background. Afterwards, the interviewer thanked the participant and debriefed them, explaining the purpose and background of the study to them. As they had, of course, been told when signing up for the study, the participant received no financial reimbursement.

All fifteen interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me and the two M.A. students: in a first step, we each transcribed those interviews we had conducted; in a second step, we exchanged our transcripts to check them against the corresponding voice recordings. This way, we ensured the highest quality of the transcripts possible. Subsequently, we entered the coding stage of the study. In a first, open coding phase, we individually worked with all fifteen transcripts and analyzed them to identify reoccurring categories, i.e. kinds of story-driven experiences – or dimensions of experientiality – in the data. After working independently, we discussed the categories we had identified within our group as well as surfacing problems and areas of disagreement, and ultimately settled only on those instances where our observations coincided sufficiently. Furthermore, we analyzed the categories with regard to their relations to each other and found several superordinate categories that ultimately led to a tentative hierarchical taxonomy of story-driven experiences (see figure 1). After the two M.A. students had finished their work at the end of term, the coding phase entered a second stage: As the principal investigator, I went back to the transcripts to re-read them carefully and check the established taxonomy against them. Simultaneously, a student assistant with a background in literary studies was trained to analyze the transcripts as well. The categories she identified were discussed in several meetings and checked against those I had previously found, those the M.A. students had identified, and the taxonomy in order to improve the taxonomy and incorporate further emergent categories. Currently, the analysis of the underlined text passages is still ongoing so that reporting its results is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. They are being analyzed, as stated above, from two perspectives: on the one hand, they serve as evidence for the kinds of story-driven experiences flesh-and-blood readers report on and will thus further undergird the already emergent categories and help with identifying new ones; on the other hand, they tentatively indicate where in the text readers locate experientiality, i.e. might help with finding textual triggers of experientiality.

Results

During the analysis of the interview data, we identified several categories and the hierarchical relationships between them. Before going into detail with each of the emergent categories, it has to be stressed that these results should still be considered preliminary for two reasons. On the one hand, the analysis of the underlined text passages may yield further categories or make reconsiderations necessary; on the other hand, a third phase of coding is currently underway. The transcripts were recently given to two trained literary scholars, who have kindly agreed to code them and then discuss their findings with me. Finally, further data sets are becoming available (as the study is currently being replicated in the context of the M.A. thesis of one of the two students who collaborated with me) and I plan on working with the
data she is collecting. Nevertheless, the analysis of the data up to this point has already revealed several kinds of story-driven experiences. In the following section, each of them (and their subcategories) will be discussed in detail and examples from the data will be provided to illustrate them (also see figure 1 for a first sketch of the taxonomy).

Story World Absorption

During the coding stage(s) of the study, the higher-order category of story world absorption was found in a bottom-up process. All coders frequently found reports of the four dimensions of story world absorption in the transcripts: attention, transportation, emotional engagement (when it is character-related, see Kuijpers et al. 2014), and mental imagery. While we initially differed in our codes, we settled on adopting the terminology used by Kuijpers and colleagues to account for the close relationship between experientiality and story world absorption.

Attention

About one third of all participants described reading experiences that can be subsumed under the header 'attention.' Within the framework of story world absorption, "attention is characterized by a deep concentration of the reader that feels effortless to them. As a consequence, the reader can lose awareness of themselves, their surroundings and the elapse of time" (Kuijpers et al. 2014, 91; original emphasis). This was clearly reflected in the reports of the participants, who frequently mentioned said deep concentration:

1) "I have to say that I'm really into a book when I'm reading, so I don't see or experience the real world anymore. I'm just … I don't hear if somebody calls me or something." (P06)
2) "When I read, I feel like everything around me just disappears and I only concentrate on the book." (P12)
3) "So I'm just like soaking up the story and the plot. I'm not really thinking about what's going on around me." (P01)

A few examples suffice to illustrate that the participants in the interviews are, at least to a certain degree, aware of the fact that reading an absorbing story makes them lose track of time and their environment – and they clearly consider this part of their reading experiences.

Transportation

Kuijpers et al. define the dimension of transportation as "a feeling of entering a story world, without completely losing contact with the actual world," and "as the subjective experience readers feel of having been to the story world while they were absorbed" (2014, 93-94). About two thirds of the participants in the study presented here discussed the feeling of being transported to the story world as one of their story-driven experiences, using various metaphors to describe this subjective experience.
1) "I like to dip into other worlds." (P02)
2) "I'm always very fascinated when an author kind of can create a whole world, especially in fantasy novels. And I like to read about this world and I like to get immersed in it." (P11)
3) "It's a different kind of experience that you just dive into a different world, into another, into this kind of story and forget everything around you." (P03)

While these examples nicely show the prominence of transportation in participants' reports of reading experiences, example 3) also indicates that they cannot always be neatly separated from one another and may strongly overlap: P03 describes their feeling of diving into the story world while forgetting everything around them – which could be subsumed under 'attention' as well.

Emotional Engagement

Almost all participants reported on reading experiences that are captured by Kuijpers and colleagues' dimension of emotional engagement, which they define as "feelings for or with characters, such as sympathy, and empathy, and identification" (2014, 93; original emphases), i.e., character-related emotional engagement. While sympathy was expressed by most of the interviewees, about half of them also reported on identifying with the characters of the story (not just with the protagonist) and around one quarter of them stated that they had felt empathy towards the characters. A few examples suffice to illustrate how omnipresent readers' emotional engagement with fictional characters was in the interview sessions and where the differences between the three subsumed phenomena lie:

1) "You also feel the things the protagonists feel." (P13)
2) "I felt empathy for the protagonist." (P12)
3) "First, I experienced pity, I felt very sorry again for the protagonist." (P12)
4) "I kind of thought that I was Holden Caulfield." (P08)
5) "I identified with the girl who wants truth." (P10)

While quotes 1) and 2) exemplify experiences of feeling empathy for characters, i.e., of experiencing the same feelings as the characters, quote 3) can be classified as an expression of sympathy: The interviewee feels sorry for the fictional beings in the narrative (in some instances, participants reported on feeling sorry for the fish in "The Trout"). Finally, examples 4) and 5) nicely demonstrate identification. P08 (and, interestingly, also P07, who selected the same novel to bring to the interview) reports on strongly identifying with the protagonist to the point where they thought they actually were him. P10 describes a similar feeling with regard to the protagonist of "The Trout."

Mental Imagery

The last dimension of story world absorption, mental imagery, also came up frequently in the interview sessions. About half of the participants reported on "visual imagery that comes to mind specifically when reading a story" (Kuijpers et al. 2014, 91; original emphasis), i.e., "surroundings, characters, and situations that the reader visualizes while reading" (Kuijpers et al. 2014, 91).
1) "I had a clear picture in my mind of her husband waiting for her." (P07)
2) "You can get an image of him in your inner eye." (P03)
3) "I have to say it was very detailed, so I did have some sort of picture in my mind." (P01)

In many instances, participants reported on mental images when the narrative text provided them with rich visual descriptions, for example when the dark walk is described in "The Trout" or the protagonist's room and her view from the armchair in "The Story of an Hour." This finding will potentially be substantiated once the analysis of the underlined passages has been carried out.

The Activation of the Experiential Background

A second higher-order category that was established in the coding process can be defined as the 'activation of the experiential background.' As was the case with story world absorption, this dimension of experientiality was identified in a bottom-up process. First, we frequently encountered the subdimensions described below; in our discussions, we settled on the codes and worked out their close connection to Caracciolo's concept of the experiential background with its different regions. However, it once again has to be stressed that the categories we identified are not clear-cut and easily separable. In line with Caracciolo (2014a) and the second generation of cognitive literary studies (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014, 261), I argue that embodiment is at the root of our being in the world. Consequently, readers' experiential backgrounds at the levels of bodily-perceptual experience are crucial for their experiences of story world absorption as well, which is indicative of a strong interrelatedness between the two higher-order categories. It is, for example, impossible for readers to visualize characters, situations and surroundings described in a fictional narrative without first having perceived visual stimuli that they can draw on, be it in the real world, in movies or in other visual media (e.g., P15, who claims they imagined the dark walk in "The Trout" based on what they saw in the "The Lord of the Rings" movies). Similarly, readers draw on their past experiences on an emotional level just as much when emotionally engaging with the characters as they do when showing emotional reactions that are not character-related. Furthermore, they would probably not know when to feel sympathy or empathy without the socio-cultural practices stored in their experiential backgrounds, or even be able to express anything without their higher-order cognitive functions. In short: the taxonomy that is currently being developed needs to account for these overlaps. However, for the sake of visualization, I still distinguished between the categories, using dotted lines to indicate their interrelatedness (see figure 1).

Memory of a Concrete Experience

When discussing their story-driven experiences, most participants also reported on what our group of coders decided to call 'memories of a concrete experience.' During the readings, their experiential backgrounds were activated, and they remembered personal experiences of manifold nature. For example, some participants, when
reading "The Story of an Hour," remembered the loss of a loved one. Others were reminded of what it was like to be a child when reading "The Trout," and in some instances, fictional characters reminded the participants of other people in their social networks or even of themselves in the past.

1) "It reminded of that time and how I felt when I lost someone and that was very relatable." (P14)
2) "It reminded me of my own experience, I lost my father a year ago." (P15)
3) "I mean it kind of reminded me, with the dialogue, a bit of my sister and me. I was always the little one who was running behind." (P13)
4) "Yeah, at that time [when P07 was reading The Catcher in the Rye], I was in school and experienced a lot of the same things. There were a lot of teachers or classmates that had kind of a resemblance to persons that I met in my life as well." (P07)
5) "I don't know why but it made me think about my childhood a little bit with my sister. Being in nature and playing with animals." (P08)

Once again, these quotes illustrate the strong connections between the different dimensions of experientiality as all five examples – at least implicitly – also express the participants' sense of identification with the characters in the story.

Memory of General Frames/Knowledge

In some cases, the participants were reminded not of a concrete personal experience but rather of general frames/knowledge they possess. The sources of these general frames varied strongly. In some cases, participants had seen images on the internet (example 2), seen something on TV or read something in the news (example 1). Often, the participants couldn't even pinpoint the source of their general knowledge. Like in example 3), participants would simply state they had a vague idea about what something (or someplace) was like without having had any personal experience in that regard.

1) "I don't know how to say it, but like it is happening in the world and I sometimes read in the news something about this. When I was reading the book I was really thinking about how sad this is." (P06)
2) "Yes. I really thought of these pictures that you see on the internet. Like petitions from … I don't know what kinds of petitions." (P12)
3) "I don't know why, but I think not only because the author's name sounds Irish but I don't know. It somehow reminds me that it's somewhere in Ireland. […] Probably it's because of the woods and the Irish names." – "And have you been to Ireland?" (Interviewer) – "No." (P15)

The interviewees often drew on general frames as well as on personal experiences to make sense of the narratives they were reading and to visualize what was afforded by the text. The experiential background was, in this case, activated on all levels.

Bodily Reactions

Another prominent reading experience that many participants reported on was coded as 'bodily reactions' and we decided to group this category with the other ways in
which readers' experiential backgrounds were activated, because bodily experience is at the core of all experience. As was already mentioned before, I am aware of its close relationships to the other kinds of reading experiences on different levels of the taxonomy explained in this paper.

1) "Yeah, when there are scenes that are really exciting, that your heartbeat really goes a little bit faster, that you are really experiencing it and when there are angsty scenes, that you're also like 'Oh, no!' Yeah, I feel the books." (P13)
2) "Like, I was tense. And I couldn't like … my heart was beating frantically. Yeah … I was just really in the book, too. Like 'please save them.'" (P06)
3) "And because I just didn't expect that it would get me so much, because normally, I'm not so emotional while reading. I don't cry a lot over books or something but yes, this book really got me crying." (P13)

The participants reported on a vast array of bodily reactions during their reading: crying, racing heartbeats, a sensation of cringing, laughing, and in one instance, even a sensation of thirst that was evoked by the bodies of water described in "The Trout."

Emotional Reactions (Not Character-Related)

Emotional reactions that were not character-related were omnipresent in our interview study. All participants reported on instances where they responded emotionally to the fictional narratives and the feelings that they described varied strongly: in many cases, sensations of suspense, curiosity, and surprise evoked by the narrative text were mentioned. These are also known as universals of narrative (see, e.g., Sternberg 2003, Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982). The participants also talked about feelings of hope, disappointment, sadness, and even anger.

1) "I was just completely overwhelmed and I had, like, I was really, really surprised to hear that." (P01)
2) "So you feel, yeah, it felt intense, you're like hoping this is maybe true. Yeah, it gives you hope." (P02)
3) "That was, I think, the story makes you curious in this moment when this monster is mentioned." (P03)

From analyzing the participants' statements, it also became clear that they often used their emotional responses to the narrative text as the backdrop against which they measured their overall reading experience and their enjoyment of the story.

Previous Experiences with Literature/Intertextuality

Finally, all coders identified a potential dimension of experientiality in the interviews that we decided to subsume under the higher-order category of the activation of the experiential background, even though there is no explicit equivalent in Caracciolo's model: readers' previous experiences with literary texts were frequently evoked, which led to intertextual statements during the interview sessions.

1) "I thought of Wuthering Heights. Emily Brontë also describes the surrounding[s], the moor." (P12)
2) "I never read Jane Austen, but it made me think about Jane Austen. Like a woman and a husband dying and all the dramatic aspects." (P08)

3) "And it reminded me of Roald Dahl stories. He wrote stories about this kind of relationship between a married man and a woman." (P03)

4) "Whether there is some, whether the story develops into some kind of horror story now and there is a Stephen King-like monster that approaches from the sky or so. Or what is happening here?" (P03)

5) "And the story I was reminded of is a short story by Neil Gaiman. There is also a kind of tunnel and it's, I don't really remember it very precisely, but there is a, the main character is also coming back in this tunnel and it has to do with courage to go through there or not." (P03)

These examples show the broad variety of instances of intertextuality that the participants experienced when reading the same pieces of stimulus material – thus attesting to the individual nature of their experiential backgrounds. Furthermore, they also exemplify the fact that we observed certain tendencies in our participants with regard to the kinds of story-driven experiences they would most prominently discuss (and, I therefore assume, experienced during their reading the three narratives). In this case, it is P03 who brought up intertextuality as one of their reading experiences time and again. To them, these instances of being reminded of other literary texts and, in general, the intellectual pleasure of reading were crucial. Other participants clearly put their focus on having been emotionally engaged with characters, having been reminded of their past, or having gained new insights which they can apply to their own lives.

Restructuring of the Experiential Background/Learning

The last type of story-driven experiences that all coders so far have agreed on was coded as learning, or, in Caracciolo's terms, a restructuring of readers' experiential backgrounds. As the quotes below nicely illustrate, the experiences grouped in this category are of manifold nature:

1) "I think, after reading the book, it gave me a push to change or adopt my own behavior, maybe. [...] I changed job while reading the book and [...] I tried to adopt some points from the book to be able to achieve my goal and be successful in the job." (P04)

2) "I had this kind of scary moment where I was thinking, okay, I have to change my life now. [...] I changed my life. I'm less on social media [...]. I deleted Instagram, so that was because of the book." (P15)

3) "[T]he end because she had the heart disease that killed her, you are quite sorry for her. And you should perhaps seize the day." (P09)

4) "And at this time, this book made me understand different things. Historical problems of the generation, the post-war generation. And I think that was a moment of understanding different things and that made it such an intense reading." (P10)
5) "Yes, and I think it's also important for real life. Because if you read a lot of books, which makes you experience different points of view, maybe it's easier to put yourself in someone else's shoes." (P13)

P04 learned something for their professional future, while P15 reconsidered their relationship with social media, and P09 got the (perhaps renewed) insight that one should make use of the time one has. P10 learned about historical events and the what-it's-like dimension of living in that time through reading a fictional narrative (see, e.g., Herman 2009), and P13 unknowingly referred to the concept of theory of mind (see, e.g., Zunshine 2006) when they claimed that reading to the amount that they do helped them to become better at adopting other people's perspectives.

As was mentioned above, the coding stage of the interviews is still ongoing since the interview data was recently forwarded to two colleagues who kindly agreed to code the transcripts and thus provide me with a fresh perspective. Consequently, more dimensions of experientiality might be added in the future while others might have to be rejected or reconceptualized.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Experientiality – First Sketch of a Taxonomy

**Discussion**

The qualitative study presented here explored the concept of experientiality by asking what flesh-and-blood readers actually consider to be the story-driven experiences undergone during the reading process. To this end, two of my M.A. students and I interviewed fifteen avid readers about both a narrative that they had pre-selected and two short stories that they read during the interview sessions and collected the kinds of reading experiences that the interviewees reported on. By developing and conducting this study, we tackled two research questions: which kinds of story-driven experiences, i.e. dimensions of experientiality, do flesh-and-blood readers actually
A Qualitative Interview Study on the Dimensions of Experientiality During Reading

report on when asked about their readings of fictional narratives? Are experientiality and story world absorption related phenomena, and if so, in what way(s) are they related?

Dimensions of Experientiality

The analysis of the interview data so far has shown that Caracciolo’s notion of story-driven experiences is a complex concept which consists of many different kinds of experiences. We conducted the interviews with avid readers in order to shed light on as many different kinds as possible; or in other words, we attempted to find out what the dimensions of experientiality are – a necessary step before the concept can be further operationalized. Even though the coding process is still ongoing, our analysis has already yielded a variety of interesting results, which I have attempted to visualize as a taxonomy (see figure 1). Very frequently, the fifteen participants in this study reported on the following ten kinds of story-driven experiences: a) losing awareness of time and their surroundings (attention), b) feeling like they have been transported into the world of the story (transportation), c) feeling for and with the characters in the story (emotional engagement), d) visualizing vividly what is described in the story (mental imagery), e) being reminded of personal experiences (memory of a concrete experience), f) being reminded of general knowledge (memory of general frames/knowledge), g) having physical responses during reading (bodily reactions), h) reacting emotionally in cases where the reactions are not character-related (emotional reactions [not character-related]), i) being reminded of past experiences with literature (previous experiences with literature/intertextuality), and j) learning something during the reading process (restructuring of the experiential background/learning). In line with the theoretical work by Kuijpers et al. (e.g., 2014) presented in the introduction of this paper, a) – d) can be grouped together as dimensions of story world absorption, while e) – i), following Caracciolo (2014a), can all be considered instances of an activation of the readers’ experiential background. Finally, the experiential background may not only be activated; reading fictional narratives also has the potential to restructure it.

The analysis of the data has also shown that the categories put forward in this taxonomy are not always clear-cut. On the contrary, they strongly overlap and seem to influence one another, which, for example, can be seen in the fact that readers’ experiential backgrounds are also activated during experiences of story world absorption (e.g. when it comes to generating mental imagery). These overlaps need to be taken into consideration when developing further empirical studies into experientiality. Similarly, the individuality of readers’ story-driven experiences needs to be accounted for: the data suggest that different participants emphasized different kinds of story-driven experiences (such as P03 and their focus on intertextuality) and that, of course, not all readers undergo the same kinds of experiences (or do it with the same degree of intensity). However, the fact that the ten types presented here were reported on by several participants in a sample size of fifteen also suggests that there are similarities between readers who share a cultural background. Based on these results, I would argue that further empirical research into experientiality should...
always combine qualitative and quantitative methods in order to account for both individual differences and statistically significant similarities. I will provide further suggestions for future research in the final subsection of this paper.

The Relationship of Experientiality and Story World Absorption

As was already mentioned in the subsection above, the study also provided insight into the answer to the second research question. When asked about their story-driven experiences, many participants discussed experiences of story world absorption, with all of its dimensions coming up frequently. Based on this finding, I suggest that experientiality and story world absorption are indeed closely-related phenomena, and that this relationship may best be conceptualized as a taxonomic one. Supported by the data collected in this study, I argue that experientiality can be seen as the overarching concept: when reading narrative texts, readers undergo experiences of different kinds. Story world absorption, then, can be seen as one type of story-driven experience. Its dimensions, consequently, can be conceptualized as subdimensions of experientiality at the most basic level of the taxonomy.

Limitations of this Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study had some limitations, which need to be addressed here and which lead to some suggestions for future research. Firstly, we could only conduct interviews with fifteen participants. While this procedure already generated a vast amount of qualitative data, it would, of course, be very interesting to interview a higher number of different readers and see to which degree their story-driven experiences are individual and to which degree they are similar. Interviewing more readers would also potentially lead to discovering further dimensions of experientiality or consolidate the findings presented here. Secondly, the decision of giving the participants two pieces of stimulus material and only letting them bring one story of their own choosing may have limited the kinds of reading experiences they reported on. It might therefore be worthwhile to discuss more self-selected fictional narratives with readers and/or give different participants different stimulus texts to read. Thirdly, though the readers were generally fluent enough to speak about their reading experiences, conducting the study showed that their linguistic skills interfered with understanding the stimulus material in some cases and with expressing their experiences in others. I assume, therefore, that there was a certain language barrier at work and that conducting the study with a sample of native speakers of English (or with German texts and native speakers of German) would yield even more useful data. Based on these three limitations to the present study, I propose adapting the study design and conducting it in an English-speaking context with a larger sample size.

Furthermore, another clear limit must be acknowledged. Due to the fact that readers were being interviewed about their experiences after the reading process had ended, only those experiences could be accessed that the participants were consciously aware of and remembered. In this study, we had no way of getting to
readers' subconscious experiences. Giving them two pieces of stimulus material to read and inquiring about their experiences directly afterwards allowed us to access their more immediate story-driven experiences but the limitations, of course, remain: they told us only about conscious experiences and they did so after they had occurred. For future research, it would make sense to combine, or triangulate, offline measures such as interviewing with online measures, e.g. eye-tracking or capturing participants’ gestures and facial expressions and other physiological data, to get insight into what test subjects experience when they read (while it is happening) and then discuss these observations with them.

As was mentioned before, one could argue that another limitation of the study was that a purposive sample was used and that, therefore, generalization beyond the sample is not possible. However, the present study aimed at a first exploration of experientiality and was not of an explanatory nature. Generalization was not necessary to find first evidence for dimensions of experientiality, though of course the results presented here must be understood in this context. The dimensions I have put forward are preliminary results, on which my future research will build. Thus, I propose to further explore experientiality (e.g. with a redesigned interview study with more participants, as was stated above) and then to start developing a self-report measure to complement already existing ones such as the story world absorption scale (Kuijpers et al. 2014) and capture, for example, readers’ activation of their experiential backgrounds and its different subdimensions.

Finally, future research should turn towards what Caracciolo calls expressive devices, i.e. those features of narrative texts that are especially evocative of experientiality. The underlined passages collected in the present study are a first step in this direction and will potentially be useful for working towards identifying them.

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Works Cited


