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An Empirical Study of Readers' Identification with a Narrator

Introduction

Putting ourselves in the shoes of characters, sharing their experiences and perceiving the storyworld as if we were part of it; the phenomenon of being absorbed in a story and identifying with its characters is one of the most fascinating in literary research. These phenomena allow us as readers to not only experience our being in the "real" world but to broaden our scope to experiences we would otherwise not encounter. Everyone who has been deeply absorbed in the magical world of Hogwarts, taken the journey with Bilbo Baggins or just taken part in a character's everyday life knows the feeling of experiencing the world through another being's eyes and sharing their perspectives. However, is it also possible to identify with a narrator and experience the storyworld in a similar way to the experiences we are making when sharing a character's perspective and identifying with him or her? Is the identification with a narrator dependent on the degree of perceived mediation through a narrator figure?

Much research has been conducted on recipients' identification with characters in literature as well as other media. Interestingly, the conditions for identification with a narrator are comparatively under-researched, although characters are seldom presented without mediation. Usually, it is the narrator who introduces us to the different characters, if he or she is not the narrator himself or herself, as it is the case in first-person narratives. Furthermore, Phelan and Booth define the narrator as "the agent or, in less anthropomorphic terms, the agency or 'instance' that tells or transmits everything – the existents, states, and events – in the narrative to a narratee" (2005, 388). Thus, a narrative without a narrating instance is impossible, probably because the storyworld conveyed in the narrative would not even come into existence if it was not for a narrating instance. However, the question remains if identification with a narrator is possible or if the narrator is too abstract a concept to be a possible point of origin for readers' identification.

In our joint pilot study, we would argue that the reader is able to construct an image of the narrator as an anthropomorphic entity, which would also enable him or her to identify with the narrator. However, this assumption is impacted by the amount of information the reader receives about the narrator, how much we can infer from the context, means of characterization and the representation of the storyworld. The research questions for the presented experiment are (1) "Do readers identify more with a first-person narrator compared to a third-person narrator?" and (2) "Do readers identify more with a narrator using internal focalization or a narrator using external focalization?"

State of the Art

The Narrator

Margolin defines the narrator as the "inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position […] from which references to the entities, actions, and events that this
discourse is about are being made” (2014). Thus, the narrator is regarded as the hypothetical producer of the discourse he or she narrates. In addition, he or she fulfills a communicative role through his or her function, which is projected in the text and constructed by the reader (Margolin 2014).

In cognitive narratology, scholars claim that the narrator is constructed in the interplay of textual features and readers’ minds, i.e. their cognitive parameters and principles. Textual signals and storytelling scenarios support the recipient in constructing and identifying a narrator (Margolin 2014). We partly based our assumptions about the reading process on this claim: we propose that readers are not only processing text-inherent signals and features to construct a specific kind of narrator with more or less insight into the characters but that apart from these textual features, the storyworld, as well as the situations depicted in it, play an important role in the identification process. The representation of the storyworld is linked to the prior knowledge and expectations of the reader. In addition,

[...] it has been noted that referential representations of meaning cannot simply be abstract and symbolic but must also include perceptual information about how objects look, sound, or feel and motoric information about how actions might be performed. (Bortolussi and Dixon 2003, 17)

Thus, the perception and construction of a storyworld and our relation to its inhabitants have to be regarded as being strongly linked to embodiedness and experiences, hence we assume that identification is linked to experientiality on the part of the reader.¹ To clarify this impact, it is crucial to mention cultural models. They are "mental representations shared by members of a culture" (Bennardo and De Munck 2014, 3); in other words, they help us to make sense of or interpret the sensory input and signals provided by the environment. It has been convincingly argued that cultural models rely on default assumptions, meaning automatic responses that are activated in a certain situation. However, cultural models should not be confused with prototypes. Although prototypes may greatly inform the default notion of a cultural model, the latter is flexible and can adapt to situations which divert from the prototype (Vaeßen 2018, 37).

Textual elements and storytelling scenarios play a role in the reader’s enterprise to identify with and construct a narrator because they provide further clues for said construction. Margolin states that

[...] obviously, the greater the number and diversity of the textual elements available for speaker indication, the richer the resultant speaker image. Once again, the two extremes would be a mere voice with no psychological person behind it and a concrete figure with both an inner life and a body. (Margolin 2014)

We construct an image of the narrator based on clues to his or her personality, which can be conveyed through everything that goes beyond mere reporting, e.g. comments

¹ Monika Fludernik coined the term "experientiality" in her work Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology in 1996 (Fludernik 2005, 155). She regards experientiality as the qualifying feature of narrative, ascribing the concept to the representation of the characters' experiences (Caracciolo 2014; Caracciolo 2012, 178). Several scholars criticized Fludernik's definition of the concept, e.g. Caracciolo (2012) and with regard to her claim for experientiality being the qualifying feature of narrative (Alber 2002).
or analysis (Margolin 2014). Other features that may help us to construct an image of the narrator could be the tone or manner in which the events are told:

The drawing of such inferences is not an exact science, for it depends on the specific inner-textual contexts as well as on the reader's cultural context; even so, such inferencing plays an important role in any portrait of the narrator drawn by the reader. (Margolin 2014)

Hence, the cultural context also impacts the reader's representation of a narrator. If we further take our own social and educational background into consideration, we arrive at what Caracciolo calls the "experiential background" (2012, 180); it becomes clear that the arising narrator figure may be a highly subjective depiction.

In their empirical study on the relation between the reader, the narrator, characters, and the characterization process, Dixon and Bortolussi try to account for this factor by distinguishing between textual features and reader effects. Reader effects are influenced by the reader's knowledge and background as well as the reading context and the recipient's goals and strategies. Hence, reader effects arise out of the interaction between the text and the reader and are not determined by the text (1995, 28). Furthermore, they refer to "narratorial cues" in the text, which are used to locate the narrator, and ascribe a crucial role to him or her by determining that he or she influences the interpretation of the text (Dixon and Bortolussi 1995, 28). In conclusion, it would also be possible to draw inferences about the narrator by evaluating the way he or she places content cues and leads the reader to interpret them. Thus, recipients should be able to draw inferences about intentions, motives, and attributes.

In *A Theory of Narrative* (1984), Franz K. Stanzel identifies three constitutive elements that form the complex of narration. The categories are mode (teller vs. reflector), perspective (internal vs. external), and person (first- vs. third-person). For this study, only the category of person is of interest. This category has to do with "the relations between the narrator and the fictional characters" (Stanzel 1984, 48). Stanzel also speaks of the identity or non-identity of the realms of existence, which means that the narrator either exists in the same fictional world as the characters do, or outside the fictional reality of the characters (Stanzel 1984, 48). The first option concerns first-person narrators, the second option third-person narrators (see also Alber 2017, 69).

A first-person narrator is characterized by individuality and "a limitation of his horizon of perception and knowledge" (Stanzel 1984, 89). Moreover, in first-person narration the inner feelings of the narrator become dominant (225). In contrast, the third-person narrator is never part of the fictional reality. What makes it difficult to distinguish authorial third-person narration from first-person narration is the fact that the authorial third-person narrator can refer to himself as 'I' (90). Furthermore, he or she can exhibit many personal attributes, but these features are no proof of his or her "physical existence and corporeality" (90) in the fictional world. If the third-person narrator is not authorial, we are confronted with the figural narrative situation, and the narrator falls back behind the so-called reflector-character. The events are presented through the eyes of that character (Stanzel 1984, 226; 48).

To summarize, the authorial narrative situation shows a dominance of the external perspective, the first-person narrative situation has subjectivity and the internal perspective as its main characteristics, the figural narrative situation is dominated by the reflector-character. What needs to be noted in correspondence to our experiment is
that Stanzel's theory has pitfalls with regard to the experimental design. The main reason for being ill-fitting is the incorporation of the authorial narrative situation within the boundaries of the third-person narration and the definition of the figural narrative situation. Yet, the experiment has not included the authorial narrator who is nevertheless vital for Stanzel's model.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette establishes a narratological model which extends the stance towards the narrator and eases, among others, the distinction between narration and perspective. He states that from his perspective "most of the theoretical works on this subject […] suffer from a regrettable confusion between […] the question who sees? and the question who speaks?" (1987, 186, original emphasis). Genette distinguishes between two types of narration and three types of focalization. The first type of narration, heterodiegetic narration, involves a narrator who is "absent from the story he tells" while in the second type of narration, homodiegetic narration, the narrator is "present as a character in the story" (1987, 244-245).

Genette's distinction between different types of focalization is particularly important for our study. He differentiates between non-focalized or zero-focalized narratives, which are similar to omniscient narration (Jahn 2014, 97); internal focalization which can further be distinguished into fixed, variable and multiple focalization; and external focalization (Genette 1987, 189-190). According to Jonathan Culler, internal focalization is focused through the character's consciousness while external focalization is focused on the character (1987, 10-11). The crucial difference between the types of focalization is, however, the amount of information that is transmitted. In internal focalization, the reader gets more information about and insight into the character's and the narrator's inner world, emotions, motive, and thoughts. External focalization, by comparison, restricts the information the reader gets to the outer perception of a character.

Nevertheless, Genette's approach provides the possibility to freely combine different types of focalization with different types of narration. Thus, both parts of his narratological model have to be seen as separate entities (see also Jahn 2014, 97). The possibility of a free combination of narration and focalization proved itself to be useful in the context of our study since it enabled us to rather change the kind of narration in the text excerpts than rewrite the text to change it with regard to internal and external focalization. Thus, the manipulation of the texts could be restricted to a minimum. At the same time, the free combination of narration and focalization enabled us to test different combinations of narration and focalization with regard to identification.

On a cognitive narratological level, Jahn argues that narration and focalization are reinforcing each other and are mutually dependent (2014, 102). Other scholars have argued that the emotions and perceptions, which are represented in focalization, have to be linked to the narrator's psychological and ideological mindset, which influence "his or her perceptions, beliefs and emotions" (Jahn 2005, 177). Van Lissa et al. refer to Kotovych et al. (2011) who found that the more the recipients have to infer about the narrator's mind, the more they relate the narrator to their own experiences and therefore identify more strongly (Van Lissa et al. 2016, 46). However, the findings of their study "indicated that narrative perspective had no main effect on empathic concern and perspective-taking for the character" (53).
Identification

The operationalization of identification posed a challenge since many different definitions circulate. We surveyed theoretical works of the nineties (Oatley [1994] and [1999] and Zillmann [1994]), Cohen's (2001) seminal work on identification as well as the empirical studies by Andringa (1996) and Bal and Veltkamp (2013).

In the 1990s, Oatley published two articles that take a theoretical approach to identification. In line with the first-generation stance towards cognitive literary studies, Oatley explains identification with the image of a simulation run on computer processors. The reader runs a simulation of the character's experiences in his or her mind. The simulation is the identification process (Oatley 1994, 66). Zillmann argues that readers process knowledge about the fictional world and other characters from a character's point-of-view and therefore react empathically. To him, identification is "an attempt at understanding as much of this other's experiential state as possible" (1994, 40).

Cohen defines identification as "a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside as if the events were happening to them" (2001, 245). He links identification to the loss of self-awareness; by abandoning ourselves, we are then able to adopt another identity, hence identify with a media figure (2001, 247). This would indicate that identification is linked to absorption and experientiality, processes which allow us to trade our self-awareness for access to the storyworld and connect our own experiences to 'lived through' experiences in this world. According to Cohen, identification is not a process that is either completely undergone or not accessed at all, it is rather an experience that differs in intensity (2001, 250). What discriminates identification from perceived similarity or affinity is the shared premise of judging: the reader must be aware of him- or herself to compare oneself to the character or narrator to make any comment (Cohen 2001, 254). Cohen's further assumption that identification is a response to textual features which evoke identification (2001, 251) ties in with our assumption that identification arises in the interplay between textual features and the readers' minds, comparable to Bortolussi and Dixon's reader effects. The identification process is constructed via the adoption of perspective, likeability and perceived similarities (2001, 252).

Drawing on Cohen's work, Busselle and Bilandzic claim that identification is difficult to separate from the setting and the situation in a storyworld (2009, 322). Thus, the encountered situation, as well as the attraction to a storyworld, may play an important role in the potential for identification. Besides empathy and cognitive perspective-taking, they designate sympathy as being another key factor (2009, 323-324). They identify four elements that encourage narrative engagement: "narrative understanding," "attentional focus," "emotional engagement," and "narrative presence" (2009, 341, original emphasis). Since Busselle and Bilandzic are referenced extensively, we modeled a few of our questions in the questionnaire after some of the items they used for developing a scale that measures narrative engagement. Since distraction can disrupt the process of identification (2009, 326), we decided on including a question in our questionnaire which should test the attention of the participants.

Starting from the assumptions of media psychology, Tal-Or and Cohen outline a theoretical look on identification by claiming that it is a temporary, imaginary process that takes place during exposure. When identifying with a character a person imagines him- or herself to be that character, a process that
involves feeling empathy and affinity towards that character (affective empathy component) and adopting the character's goals and point of view within the narrative (cognitive empathy component). (2010, 404)

Igartua refers to Oatley (1999) by stating that empathy as well as merging with a character leads to identification – we do not only feel with a character, we become that character (Igartua 2010, 348). The results of his study on identification with characters in films suggest that cognitive and emotional empathy as well as merging play an important role in the identification process (2010, 349). Another important factor may be the loss of self-awareness (2010, 352).

The theoretical outlines of identification have been put to the test: for example, Andringa looked at narrative distance and its effects on the reader's emotional involvement. She assumes that narrative perspectives have distinct effects on the reader's emotional reaction to the text (1996, 434). She reviews that trained readers have no problems to handle various points-of-view and still get emotionally involved. Less experienced readers often go for and stick with the narrator's point-of-view (Earthman qtd. in Andringa 1996, 435). Of course, this finding is noteworthy with regard to this study's research questions. Dixon and Bortolussi (1996) also investigated reader constructions of the narrator. Their finding that "readers attribute attitudes and beliefs of adjacent characters to the narrator" (1996, 428) is of great significance in relation to their concept of narrator-character associations (Bortolussi and Dixon 2003, 82). It underlines an ever-pending problem, namely that readers mistake a character for the narrator and thus identify with the 'wrong' person. Although Bal and Veltkamp conducted a study that is not directly linked to identification – they explore the importance of empathy – they explore the importance of empathy – they found that reading fiction has a positive effect on the reader's capacity to feel empathy (2013, 8). Their study partly initiated our plan to question experienced and less experienced readers.

For the operationalization of the concept, we assumed that identification is an active, experiential process that is evoked by adopting a perspective, likability and perceived similarities. As a consequence, the reader develops an empathetic bond with the narrator figure and will temporarily lose self-awareness and thereby merge with the narrator. Other influencing factors could be readers' emotions, e.g. sympathy, adoption of goals and shared experiences.

An Empirical Study of Readers' Identification with a Narrator

Since the study presented in this article was a joint study, we were able to test more hypotheses in an interrelated study design, two narratological approaches, and their subsequent categories in one experiment and derive hypotheses aiming at narration (based on Stanzel's *A Theory of Narrative*) on the one hand, and focalization (based on Genette's *Narrative Discourse*) on the other. We investigated readers' identification with a first-person or a third-person narrator or with a narrator using internal or external focalization respectively. With regard to first-person and third-person narrators, we assumed that readers would identify with a first-person rather than a third-person narrator. For the experiment on focalization, we hypothesized that readers would rather identify with a narrator using internal focalization than with a narrator using external focalization.
Participants

The participants were students from different study programs, namely literary studies, teacher trainees, applied languages, and students from engineering programs. All in all, 34 students participated in the study. They were equally assigned to the experiment on narration and focalization. In the context of each experiment, the participants were assigned to two groups to establish the prerequisites for a counterbalanced research design. The two groups referred to at this point are groups created for the different parts of the study. In each group, subgroups were designed so that an equal distribution of original and manipulated text excerpts could be achieved. Finally, the participants of the different groups were asked to estimate how much they read so that we could further distinguish between different levels of reading expertise. The test subjects were informed that the participation in the experiment was voluntary and that they would neither receive credit points nor be marked for their answers to ensure that none of the participants felt pressured in taking part in the study. The participants were not remunerated. The mean age for all participants was 21.2 years. All test subjects were non-native speakers of English. Since the study worked with English texts, participants were asked to complete a language competency test to ensure that comprehension problems would not falsify the experiment’s results.

Procedure

We decided to use a counterbalanced research design. Bortolussi and Dixon describe this strategy as employing "different sets of materials, and [thus] subjects are exposed to only one set of materials in each condition, yet across subjects, all conditions and materials are used equally often" (2003, 263). Hence, the groups received text excerpts in the original and manipulated text excerpts. Two groups received text excerpts in which the narrative situation was manipulated, one of the other two groups received texts which were manipulated with regard to focalization. Finally, the four groups were provided with a control text, which uses a covert narrator, who is barely perceptible and conveys the story merely through reflector characters. Furthermore, the chosen text excerpt conveyed the story primarily through a dialogue between two characters. The control text was chosen based on the assumption that the participants should not be able to identify with the narrator, because the excerpt does not present information on him or her. Hence, we assumed that readers would only be able to construct a narrator-character association. In each group we used a within-subjects design: the subjects were exposed to an original and a manipulated version of the excerpts each. In order to compare the groups, we used a between-subjects design; the subjects were exposed to different arrangements of text excerpts.

The experiment was conducted with different groups of readers, namely lay readers, professional readers, and readers on an intermediate level. Van Lissa et al.’s study suggests that a higher level of experience with literature influences the participants’ empathic responses (2016, 51-54) and Thury and Friedlander’s (1995) experiment indicates that a higher level of expertise has an impact on the readers’ stance towards the characters as well as the text. The participants were grouped according to their study program. All participants who studied in programs unrelated to literature were assigned to the lay readers group. We assumed undergraduate students related to literature to have an intermediate level and graduate students to have a professional level. We
assumed that participants who studied literary studies and were frequently confronted with concepts of narration and focalization were less likely to strongly identify because they would rather be inclined to read the texts analytically. Hence, the longer the participants were confronted with the concepts in their everyday life the stronger their analytical reading behavior and the lower the degree of identification.

All participants were asked to take part in the study in a room at RWTH Aachen University, thus they all encountered the same setting during the experiment. The study was conducted over a stretch of four days. The first dates of each set were used for the language competency test. As estimated these sessions took ten to fifteen minutes.

Materials

The experiment was conducted with four text excerpts using different kinds of narration and focalization. The text excerpts were chosen because we assumed a higher potential for identification in them. This is due to the thematic focus of the excerpts: all texts depict experiences which could be recognized and shared by the readers. We decided on text excerpts thematizing familiar emotions like love, homesickness, sympathy or sadness.

The texts used in the experiment investigating the identification with first- or third-person narrators were chosen for the following reason: the participants should not be familiar with the texts. Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1998) deals with the lives of two young men living in Belfast – one Catholic, Chuckie, the other Protestant, Jake. It is set in 1994 and covers the time shortly before and after the ceasefire between the IRA and the Social Democratic and Labour Party in Northern Ireland. The book follows Chuckie and Jake in their quest to find love amid the blossoming peace negotiations and how their lives are affected by the 'Fountain Street Bombing.' Sarah Blakely-Cartwright's *Red Riding Hood* (2011) is the more unknown book to the eponymous film from 2011. The assumption was that *Eureka Street* treats a topic too special to have a large readership and that *Red Riding Hood* was received mainly as the movie instead of the book. Furthermore, both books display everyday life situations.

The experiment on focalization included a text excerpt from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and a passage from James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2010). The text excerpt from *The Maze Runner* uses heterodiegetic narration and is internally focalized. It transmits the inner life of Thomas, the protagonist of the story. Thomas functions as a reflector character throughout the narrative. Thus, the narrator steps back behind the character and focuses on his perceptions. The chosen passage presents a conversation between Thomas and his friend Chuck and Thomas' subsequent emotions and thoughts, thematically dealing with homesickness, love, and friendship. The passage taken from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* uses homodiegetic narration with external focalization. The novel presents the events from the perspective of an autistic teenager and oscillates between internal and external focalization throughout the course of the narrative. Thus, the novel presents us with the outstanding perception and ability of the homodiegetic narrator, while at the same time also showing the protagonist's disabilities with regard to emotions and their evaluation. In the chosen passage, Christopher tells about the events which happen immediately after he has found the dead dog in the garden.
We decided on manipulating only the narration because this would mean the least manipulation of the text on our part. By manipulating the narration in the text, we restricted changes to the substitution of names, personal and relative pronouns. Changes in focalization just included deleting a few sentences in the original. Cutting whole text passages or rewriting the texts would have heightened the probability that our manipulations influenced the readers’ perception. Complying with these considerations, in the texts for the experiment on the narrator as well as in the excerpts for the experiment on focalization, only the narrator's position with regard to the storyworld was changed. This should allow us to get further insights into the relation of the narrator, focalizer, and the readers' possible point of origin for identification. The broader array should also make it possible to draw inferences on focalization detached from narration as every possible combination of narration and internal or external focalization has been tested. Finally, all participants were provided with the same control text, an excerpt from David Lodge's *Small World* (1984), which contained merely dialogue.

The participants filled out one questionnaire for each text excerpt. The questionnaires were composed of twenty questions and provided yes/no-answers, five-point scales and comment fields as answering possibilities. We included a broader range of answering possibilities since we decided that the different phenomena in question, e.g. empathy, likability, and similarity, need different measurements to assess them. Furthermore, we included open comment fields to offer the participants the opportunity to share further thoughts on a possible identification process with us. We hoped that we would gain insights into and factors for identification that we have not thought about. In addition, the order of the questions and the order of the text excerpts were randomized.

**Results**

Original Excerpt: *Maze Runner*

All participants on the intermediate level stated that they were able to name emotions and motives of the narrator. The question concerning 'Insight into the Narrator's Mind' and empathy scored higher on the scales, achieving a mean value of 2.25 or 2 respectively. Although the test subjects in this group did not show great conviction in the narrator's motives or ideologies, 75% of the participants were convinced by the narrator's emotions. The lay readers were rather indifferent towards the narrator's motives but 66.67% of the test subjects categorized the narrator as being likable. The category 'Similarity to oneself' also has to be located in the middle of the field with a tendency towards the lower end of the scale, showing a mean value of 3.67. 'Emotional Closeness' was evaluated with the same mean value, indicating a possible connection.

Original Excerpt: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

The evaluation of the narrator's emotions scored higher with this text excerpt than with the text excerpt from *Maze Runner*. The mean value is 2.25 for the intermediate level group. Furthermore, the mean value for the question regarding the understanding of events scored higher. The mean value is 3, indicating that the readers were in a better position to understand the events in a way similar to the narrator than with regard to the
original from *Maze Runner*. The participants claimed that they were able to name emotions or motives of the narrator. Surprisingly, the category 'Similarity to oneself' also scored higher, although the text is mostly externally focalized. The mean value was 3.5 as opposed to 3.75 in reply to the other text excerpt. The insight into the narrator's mind was also evaluated higher, namely with a mean value of 2. The test subjects in the lay reader group were convinced that they were able to name emotions and motives the narrator might have and evaluated the similarity to themselves with a mean value of 2.33. The participants evaluated the emotional closeness towards the narrator with a rather high value (mean = 2). 66.67% would support the narrator and were convinced by the narrator's emotions.

**Manipulated Version: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**

The manipulated text excerpt from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* scored lower on identification with emotions (mean = 3.25), similarity to oneself (mean = 4.75), emotional closeness (mean = 4.75) and empathy (mean = 4.75) in the intermediate level group. On part of the lay readers, the narrator in this text excerpt scored high on the categories "Identification with Motives," "Identification with Emotions" and "Similarity to Narrator's Understanding" achieving mean values of 2 for the first category and 1.5 for the other two categories. This indicates a rather high potential for identification. Moreover, the participants felt that they were able to name emotions and motives of the narrator, but evaluated their similarity to him as indifferent. Although the test subjects felt that they did not have insight into the narrator's mind and were not emotionally close, empathy scored high again with a mean value of 1.5. However, the participants were not convinced by the narrator's motives and only 50% were convinced by his emotions.

In the professional readers' group, no participant was intrigued by the storyworld which indicates that the amount of information presented through external focalization with heterodiegetic narration did not suffice to construct a storyworld in which the participants could be transported. The categories "Similarity to Oneself," "Emotional Closeness" and "Empathy" scored rather low in this group (mean value = 4.33).

**Manipulated Version: Maze Runner**

Confirming our assumptions about the likelihood of identification with internal focalization, the greatest potential for identification occurred in response to the text excerpt told by a homodiegetic narrator with internal focalization. The participants in the intermediate level group could identify rather well with the narrator's motives and emotions and they felt that they understood the events in a way similar to the narrator. The narrator was evaluated as being likable by 100% of the participants. The text excerpt also scored highest in the storyworld-category. All participants in this group felt able to name emotions and motives of the narrator. The categories "Feelings towards Narrator," "Emotional Closeness" and "Empathy" scored highest in this text excerpt (mean value = 1.75; mean value = 2; mean value = 1.5). Interestingly, there was only a small difference between the participants' evaluation of the categories "Empathy" (mean value= 1.5) and "Insight into Narrator's Mind" (mean value = 2) in the text excerpt told by a homodiegetic narrator and by a heterodiegetic narrator. This could indicate that the participants constructed narrator-character associations at this
point. The results were comparable for the lay readers group. However, the categories "Insight into the Narrator's Mind" and "Feelings towards the Narrator" scored high with a mean value of 1.5 respectively. With regard to the professional readers group, "Insight into the Narrator's Mind" scored highest (mean value = 1.33) and empathy also scored high with a mean value of 1.67.

Original Excerpt: *Eureka Street*

The importance of empathy in our definition and likability as an evoking factor for identification are rightly emphasized. 77% of the participants (mean value = 3.33) identified with the emotions of the narrator. Nevertheless, hardly any of the participants reported feeling emotionally close to the narrator. Also, the report on goal adoption is ambiguous (62% of the readers agreed). Although the majority of the participants were convinced by the narrator's motives, would support the narrator, and understood the events similarly, just one half of the test subjects reported that they identified in the comment section. The loss of self-awareness and the assumed accompanying processes like transportation were not detectable here.

Original Excerpt: *Red Riding Hood*

The emphasis on empathy and the importance of likability also holds true for this excerpt, yet the percentages are lower than those of the first text. At least a good half felt emotionally close to the narrator. Concerning the adoption of goals, it is safe to say that two-thirds are convinced by the motives, identify with them, and would support the narrator. However, the ideologies were not considered convincing. Our assumption that identification is accompanied by transportation cannot be supported with the data for this excerpt because only 50% of the participants rated the storyworld as enthralling.

Manipulated Version: *Eureka Street*

The results of this excerpt are not very indicative. The items that can be related to the formation of an emotional bond ("convincing emotions," "identification with emotions," and "empathy") substantiated the significance of empathy in our definition of identification. The relevance of likability is reinforced as well. However, the values that refer to the adoption of goals are all rather in the midrange. They cannot be backed up by the items that indicate support and understanding for the narrator. However, the results of this excerpt show the highest outcome for the loss of self-awareness. Almost two-thirds of the participants declared the respective desire and half of them were captivated by the story's surroundings.

Manipulated Version: *Red Riding Hood*

The results of this excerpt highlight the importance of the formation of an emotional bond between the reader and the target of identification (mean value = 3.78). Additionally, the high scores for likability highlight this item as one central premise for the identification process. The adoption of goals remains an uncertain territory. Although usually two thirds or more report to be convinced of the narrator's motives and signal support for him or her, the identification with said motives and goals never scores equally high.
Discussion

The results of the experiment on focalization showed that the degree of identification is highest in a narrative told by a homodiegetic narrator with internal focalization. These findings support the assumption that identification is strongly dependent on and influenced by the insights the narrator allows us to share. These insights into the focalizer's mind facilitate access and seem to enable readers to construct an emotional bond with the focalizer. Especially empathy seems to have an impact on identification and seems to be linked to the type of focalization. This is understandable as empathy presupposes knowledge about the agent a reader identifies with. Furthermore, the results indicate that the type of focalization has a greater impact on identification than the type of narration. One could argue that the type of narration influences the degree of identification as the results indicate that identification occurs on a continuum. Homodiegetic narration with internal focalization may be situated at one end of the scale, followed by heterodiegetic narration with internal focalization, homodiegetic narration with external focalization, and the least likely combination for identification seems to be heterodiegetic narration with external focalization. These findings indicate that the readers rather focused on the focalizer, which was the same person as the narrator in the text excerpt using homodiegetic narration with internal focalization.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to comment on the results for the identification process with third-person narrators. Participants from both groups failed to distinguish between the narrator and the reflector-character in the original excerpt of Red Riding Hood and the manipulated version of Eureka Street featuring a third-person narrator. This is indicated by the free comments, in which readers frequently call the narrator by the name of the reflector-character. Only one student explained that he only identifies with a narrator "when he is actually part of the story." His overall answers and the comment reveal that he has not 'found' the far-receded narrator and as a result failed to identify. He illustrates perfectly that non-specialist recipients are not prejudiced by expectations that falsify or influence their answers.

Moreover, the discrepancy between the participants' self-report and their answers might be due to the numerous understandings of identification. As one student commented, she only identifies when the narrator and the storyworld are similar to herself and her surroundings. She states that the narrator has to be "female," must live in the "21st century," come from a "western/European culture," and be a "(university) student." These very explicit triggers are not congruent with those identified by the scholarship quoted here. One could argue that the triggers listed by said scholarship are more general because they are developed to apply to a wider readership. With regard to these results, we assume that there can be a discrepancy between what we define as identification and the readers' understanding of identification.

In the experiment described above, we were able to obtain interesting results for the identification process with first-person narrators. First of all, the excerpts that feature a third-person narrator show that answers including 'rather' were ticked more often than in the excerpts which are narrated by a first-person narrator. Intuitively, we would claim that this shows that identification with a third-person narrator is not as immediate and strong as identification with a first-person narrator.

Secondly, transportation seems to be more likely with third-person narration. The excerpts narrated by a third-person narrator displayed higher percentages for the items
"desire to switch roles" and "intriguing story world." One reason may be that identification with first-person narrators is smoother, more direct, and less conscious so the reader is unaware of having been transported. Texts featuring a third-person narrator have to lure the reader into the story world before he or she can enter the identification process.

It is interesting that only 22% of the recipients of *Eureka Street* (original) felt emotionally close or rather close to the narrator. The remaining recipients did not feel close. Especially in the control group, no one rated the closeness better than "indifferent." However, the comments and answers to vital questions reveal that participants have identified. The excerpt is narrated by a male first-person narrator who describes how he picks up a girl and has sex with her. What stands out is that the all-male control group may have felt uncomfortable to comment on the emotional closeness to the narrator keeping in mind that the excerpt was explicit. To make a profound suggestion as to why the participants chose to answer in this way is impossible to answer with only this set of data.

**Conclusions and Problems**

The current study investigated if flesh-and-blood readers identify with first-person narrators compared to third-person narrators and narrators using internal focalization versus external focalization. The results suggest that the participants identified more with the first-person narrator, yet this does not necessarily confirm our hypothesis since the participants constructed narrator-character associations with regard to the text featuring a figural narrative situation. As stated earlier, in the figural narrative situation, the narrator recedes behind a reflector character. This led to the problem that participants in the experiment identified with the reflector-character instead of the narrator and thereby formed narrator-character associations (Bortolussi and Dixon 2003, 82). Thus, in a replication of the experiment, one text with a first-person narrative situation and one text which features the authorial narrative situation should be used so that a clearer distinction between the narrator and the characters can be ensured.

The results of the experiment on focalization indicated that the type of focalization has a greater impact on identification than narration, but narration may influence the degree of identification. In addition, the findings showed that identification is linked to a narrator's presence – the participants needed a present narrator to identify with him or her. Thus, narrative presence can be seen as a presupposition for readers' identification with a narrator but the degree of identification depends on the distance between narrator and focalizer and the restriction of information through the type of focalization. The participants' expertise with regard to literary texts did not impact the degree of identification. Nevertheless, we think that it was still useful to have different groups of readers since they provided us with the justification that non-specialist readers are not prejudiced by habituation that influenced their answers. Expertise, reader variation, and the number of participants are factors that need improvement for a replication of the study. The distribution of different expertise levels should be equal, which we could not ensure in our pilot study. Furthermore, our sample size was rather small (n = 17 for each study); a larger group would account for more reader variation. Thus, the study should be replicated with a larger sample size, in order to observe a change or a stabilization of the trends we deduced so far.
For future research, we suggest defining abstract concepts like 'ideology' in greater detail. Additionally, we realized that the question "Did you find your mind wandering while reading the excerpt?" was misleading for the participants as some of them seem to have understood it as asking for their imagination in the storyworld rather than asking for their level of attention and distraction. Nevertheless, the study suggests interesting findings once the theoretical background and the experimental design fit better than in this case. Taking into account confirmed results about the first-person narrator and the observations made for the text excerpts that were narrated by a third-person narrator, it seems as if readers rule out whatever hinders their identification and concentrate on other features to identify with a narrator or a character. Further research should investigate how much the reader overlooks willingly in order to identify. Other research areas which opened up during the experiment (and which we propose for future research) are: a closer investigation of the relation between experientiality and identification, and identification, narration, and focalization. As the reader returns to the spotlight of (empirical and cognitive) literary studies, we propose to conduct further research into different narrator types and their reception by different groups. What this joint study has shown and what is clear to us is that there is potential identification with a narrator on the reader's part and the narrator is not always as abstract an entity as we sometimes think.

Works Cited


Appendix
Text Excerpt Number: C3

1. Would you support the narrator? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
2. Did the narrator convince you with regard to his motives? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
3. Did the narrator convince you with regard to his emotions? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
4. Did the narrator convince you with regard to his ideologies? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
5. Could you identify with the motives of the narrator? Yes —— Rather Yes —— Indifferent —— Rather Not —— No No answer ☐
6. Could you identify with the emotions of the narrator? Yes —— Rather Yes —— Indifferent —— Rather Not —— No No answer ☐
7. Do you think you were able to understand the events in a way that was similar to the narrator’s understanding? Yes —— Rather Yes —— Indifferent —— Rather Not —— No No answer ☐
8. Did you find your mind wandering while you read the text excerpt? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
9. Did you find the narrator likeable? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
10. Would you like to switch roles with the narrator? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
11. Were you intrigued by the storyworld? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
12. Is the narrator an animal? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
13. Do you think you can name any emotions or motives the narrator might have? Yes ☐ No ☐ No answer ☐
14. Do you think of the narrator as similar to you? Yes —— Rather Similar —— Indifferent —— Rather No —— No No answer ☐
15. Do you think you have gained insight into the narrator’s mind? Yes —— Rather Yes —— Indifferent —— Rather No —— No No answer ☐
16. How would you rate your feelings towards the narrator?
Likeable — Rather likeable — Indifferent — Rather unlikeable — Unlikeable
No answer □
17. Do you feel emotionally close to the narrator?
Yes —— Rather Close —— Indifferent —— Rather Not —— No No answer □
18. Do you feel empathy with the narrator?
Yes —— Rather Yes —— Indifferent —— Rather Not —— No No answer □
19. Can you identify with the narrator? If so, please explain why.
20. When do you identify with a narrator?