

“A queer space rock of color punches out a racist pig:”  
Revising the Paradox of Fiction and Reshaping Narrative  
Empathy and Activism Through the Case of Children’s  
TV Show *Steven Universe*

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Narrative fiction has long been investigated as a source of empathy, but there is much debate over whether empathy for fictional characters can translate to real-life acts of altruism or decreases in stigma—a problem known as the paradox of fiction. Drawing on current work in psychology and literary studies, this paper reviews theories of narrative empathy and readdresses the paradox of fiction by introducing a four-part theory of narrative empathy as follows: (1) audiences come into situations with a set of beliefs, which they will use as a lens to take the perspective of fictional characters, (2) taking the perspective of a sympathetic character that belongs to a stigmatized group humanizes the character and the social group they belong to, which thus affords the priming of changing stigmatized beliefs, (3) the primed destigmatized beliefs manifest into reality through audience interaction and discussion of the belief, of which facilitates and cements the belief through its emergence as social proof, and (4) the beliefs supported by social proof become avenues for actions in real life by revising our previously held beliefs. Preliminary evidence for this theory is provided through the case of online-facilitated fan discussion of children’s TV show *Steven Universe*. In the process, this paper also argues that entertainment fiction can be a particularly strong agent of social change, as its perceived surface-level lack of affective and material costs invites audiences to engage with it, unlike perhaps more directly demanding activist campaigns, and thus deserves further investigation by fields studying narrative empathy.

*Keywords: Narrative empathy, paradox of fiction, stigma, altruism, online fandom, Steven Universe*

“Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.”

— Albert Camus

It was 3 AM and the stars were glittering in the sky when it hit me that I’ve interacted with more fictional characters than actual people in the past year. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit, I found myself with an abundance of free time, and, naturally, one year into quarantine, I’ve watched virtually (pun intended) every show that exists on Netflix. And in my pajama-clad, bleary-eyed, couch-potato glory, I stumbled across a TV-PG kids cartoon called *Steven Universe*.

*Steven Universe* follows our main heroes, the titular character Steven and the Crystal Gems (alien, genderless, queer, female-presenting gem-people that can also combine with each other to form other alien, genderless, queer, female-presenting gem-people), as they fight to protect the world from monsters and other such threats to humanity. When I re-read that brief synopsis, it looks absurd (and it is, in the best way), but the relevant point is that *Steven Universe*’s characters are positive representations of LGBTQ+, people of color, people with disabilities, and people of all body types, to name a few. This show is a particularly poignant case to discuss narrative, stigma, and empathy, as its whimsical and fantastical animated nature provides a place where the somewhat absurd world and premise mirrors and supports the idea that discrimination against gem-people is equally ludicrous. (I mean, c’mon, they’re gem-people.) Further, *Steven Universe* is a particularly appropriate case due to its nature as a coming-of-age story specifically focused around the theme of empathy, which thus especially encourages empathizing with stigmatized groups. I begin with this story to demonstrate how current cases use narrative to represent traditionally marginalized identities, and thus to argue that narrative’s connection to stigma warrants further discussion and investigation.

The phenomenon alluded to above, termed *narrative empathy*, involves whether or not we can empathize with characters in narratives and whether it can be translated to altruistic actions in the real world. Narrative empathy, through taking the perspective of a member of an out-group<sup>1</sup> (referred to in the relevant literature as “perspective-taking”), has been shown to have an effect on decreasing stigma, though there are limits to its reach. The most often debated limit is the paradox of fiction, that is, how empathizing with a fictional character has no concrete purpose, since, if we don’t have an outlet for the decreased stigma to manifest, it never

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<sup>1</sup> An out-group (also written as “outgroup”) refers in psychology to a different social group than oneself. Social groups may be people of different races, genders, or sexual identities, for instance.

journeys beyond the realm and context of fiction in all its intangibility. And if we empathize with characters instead of real people, it provides us with moral satisfaction without actually having done anything to help anyone.

But does fictional empathy actually present a paradox? The paradox relies on the assumption that fiction is distinct from reality: however, there is little discussion in the literature surrounding narrative empathy regarding why we insist on drawing such distinctions between fiction and reality. Therefore, in this essay I will argue that there is less of a distinction between fiction and reality than is currently assumed. For example, the lines between fiction and reality are already blurred in the realms of creative nonfiction, memoirs, narratives based on true stories, and fandom culture. Online fan and meme culture from *Steven Universe* in particular are uniquely associated with real-life audience interaction (as we will later see in our case study), and they thus will be the lens through which I will argue that, through audience interaction, fiction manifests into reality.

I will first review the current discourse around narrative empathy as an effective intervention for decreasing stigma through empathizing with characters, as contextualized by theories from both psychology and literary studies that explain those findings. Then, having provided the necessary theoretical framework, I will address the current problem of the paradox of fiction through fan reactions to *Steven Universe* as a brief particular case study, through which I will postulate four theoretical avenues in order to suggest that the distinction between fiction and reality is not as stark as is currently assumed, thus affording the translation of the fiction-inspired decrease of stigma<sup>2</sup> to reality.

### Empirical Evidence of Narrative Empathy

In order to understand the potential power of shows like *Steven Universe*, we must first discuss the current views of narrative empathy upon stigma, starting with the field of psychology. Psychologists have empirically analyzed the efficacy of narrative in interventions specifically designed to increase empathy<sup>3</sup> for stigmatized groups.<sup>4</sup> For example, in a recent study, participants were shown one of two different versions of the film

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<sup>2</sup> While this paper will be considering multiple forms of stigma in its analysis, it is important to note that different types of stigma are experienced in various ways by different people, and that there is no solution that will work for all of them.

<sup>3</sup> Empathy has historically had many meanings in different contexts (see Batson's 2009 paper "These things called empathy: Eight related but distinct phenomena" for a meta-analysis). In this paper, we will take empathy to simply refer to the ability to feel the emotions and understand the perspective of others (Keen, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to clarify what I mean by stigmatized groups. Stigma has been defined by psychologists as "the social rejection of individuals based on personal or social characteristics such as race, religion, and mental or physical health status" (Chung & Slater, 2013, p. 894). Thus, when I refer to stigmatized groups, I am referring to groups that are commonly socially rejected and stereotyped: examples from Western culture include people of color, immigrants, and those with mental illness.

*Sherrybaby*, with one version depicting a “more stigmatized” protagonist, a recovering drug addict, and the other depicting a “less stigmatized” protagonist, a single mother (Chung & Slater, 2013). They then rated the protagonist on different factors related to social acceptance and perspective taking. Importantly, even though participants felt less social acceptance for the more stigmatized character, they still identified with them. Further, even though participants exposed to the more stigmatized character were less likely to partake in perspective-taking, perspective-taking did still occur, though to a lesser degree. Findings also showed that when participants took the perspective of a highly stigmatized protagonist (in this case, the recovering drug addict), out-group distinctions were more likely to decrease. To summarize, this study’s findings suggest that even though narratives can draw audiences into the story, “pre-existing attitudes and prejudices can interfere with perspective-taking,” since the extent to which the participants were able to take the perspective of a stigmatized character was affected by their attitudes toward the stigmatized group the character belonged to (Chung & Slater, 2013, p. 907).

Corroborating these results, a separate study done by psychologists Igartua and Frutos also found that while narrative encourages an audience to engage in perspective-taking, perspective-taking is inhibited by preconceived stereotypes (Igartua & Frutos, 2017). In their study, participants first completed the Modern Racism Scale, an inventory that measures racist attitudes, and then they viewed a short film about immigrants (a group that is stereotyped in Western culture due to racism). The two conditions in this experiment were watching a film that “arouses empathy toward immigrants” or instead watching a film that “underscores positive intergroup contact” (Igartua & Frutos, 2017, p. 158). Directly after the participants viewed the films, the researchers measured the audience’s identification<sup>5</sup> with characters from in-groups and out-groups, as well as their post-manipulation attitudes regarding immigration. In accordance with the Chung and Slater study, this study found that the empathy-arousing short film resulted in “greater identification with outgroup characters” and “more positive attitudes toward immigration,” *but only for those who had low or moderate pre-manipulation levels of racial prejudice* (Igartua & Frutos, 2017, p. 158). Thus, these two studies both showed similar narrative effects of increasing perspective-taking and identification with members of an out-group, though with the significant caveat that perspective-taking is inhibited by preconceived stereotypical notions.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, narrative empathy has been empirically shown to

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<sup>5</sup> Identification is the process by which an audience takes the perspective of a character, filtered through the lens of their own experiences (Chung & Slater, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Of interest are the distinctions teased out by different experimental manipulations. In particular, Chung and Slater’s manipulation of the degree of character stigmatization demonstrated that the depiction of stigmatized characters matters in terms of the degree to which the audience can take the character’s perspective, and that negative depictions may confirm existing prejudices. Meanwhile, the Igartua and Frutos study’s manipulation of comparing narrative empathy with characters to positive intergroup contact showed

decrease negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups, though there are limits. One important question not addressed by these previous studies is if the aroused empathy lasts beyond the moment, as studies so far have not measured if the decreases in stigma persist after an extended period of time—which is why it may be useful to look at a medium that people engage with for longer periods of time: popular media and fandom. In the following section, I will discuss why narrative can promote an empathetic response in an audience, in order to further contextualize the rhetorical situation surrounding narrative empathy and to begin arguing for a new perspective on narrative empathy: audience interaction.

### Why Narrative Empathy Works: Fiction as a Framework for Decreasing Stigma Through Perspective-Taking

Several scholars have talked about how the link between reading fiction and learning to identify with characters' perspectives works to create empathy. For instance, in the field of literary studies, Dr. Suzanne Keen has theorized that narrative provides a specific type of empathy that allows us to see beyond group-distinct lines, a concept she calls *broadcast strategic empathy*. According to Keen, broadcast strategic empathy “calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations” (Keen, 2006, p. 215). Essentially, by showing the audience that the out-group members are similar to them in terms of their common humanity, narrative lowers the distinctive barriers between social groups and thus facilitates empathy for others different from oneself.

Furthermore, researchers in the field of psychology have made similar arguments. For example, reading literary fiction has been empirically shown to at least temporarily increase one's Theory of Mind<sup>7</sup> (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Essentially, Theory of Mind is important to perspective-taking, as one must first be able to identify others' emotions and feelings in order to be able to understand their perspective. The experiment performed by Kidd and Castano compared the effects of reading “literary fiction” to “nonfiction” and “popular fiction,” with reading literary fiction being the only one that increased performance on a Theory of Mind task. Thus, the narratives formed by literary fiction can increase our Theory of Mind, that is, our ability to understand others' emotions, which can be directed towards empathizing with characters. Keen's concept of

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that narrative empathy is more than just exposure to out-groups, and that the efficacy of narrative empathy interventions is limited by the strength of the perceptions of the out-group that participants brought into the interventions.

<sup>7</sup> The Theory of Mind is a concept in psychology that has two important distinctions: *affective Theory of Mind*, “the ability to detect and understand others' emotions,” and *cognitive Theory of Mind*, “the inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions” (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377). Kidd and Castano note that it is affective Theory of Mind that is associated with empathy, and, thus, we will take Theory of Mind in this paper to refer to affective Theory of Mind; cognitive Theory of Mind will not be discussed further.

broadcast strategic empathy can be used to explain the results from Kidd and Castano's experiment: the unique capacity of narrative to provide the perspective of an out-group facilitates an audience's ability to emotionally understand others' common experience of humanity through Theory of Mind.

Of note here is Kidd and Castano's distinction between literary fiction and popular fiction: they and other scholars have argued that literary fiction, but not popular fiction, has the capacity to challenge readers' expectations and thinking (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Miall & Kuiken, 1999). Further, other scholars have argued that popular genre fiction, while entertaining, is experienced passively, while literary fiction engages readers critically as writers (Barthes, 1974), prompting them to "engage the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences" (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377).

However, popular narratives can also be conducive to empathy and sociomoral understanding, if, as psychologist Justin Martin argues, two conditions are present (1) the characters' social worlds contain social concepts that parallel the audience's social worlds in real life and (2) the narrative provides a social context that affords the interaction of these concepts in diverse ways (Martin, 2021). This argument also resonates with the field of literary studies' claims that fiction, particularly science fiction and fantasy with their innovative social realities, can create social change through providing a metaphorical context for understanding and discussing the nuances of important social issues (Brown, 2017). Adrienne Maree Brown writes that science fiction is an emergent strategy, that is, a way for us to "imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms" (Brown, 2017, p. 14). Corroborating Brown's argument, Donna Haraway notes that writing about minoritized people's experiences through science fiction involves unconscious structuring that "throw[s] into question the relationships of gender and race" (Penley, Ross, & Haraway, 1990, p. 16). Building on Brown's and Haraway's arguments, it follows that popular science fiction, such as *Steven Universe*, can provide a fictional social world that meets Martin's criteria of paralleling real life and providing a non-threatening context to explore stigmatized social issues.

Chung and Slater argue that entertainment narratives offer a "non-threatening" context where audiences can be comfortable with empathizing and identifying with a stigmatized character through experiencing their cognitive and affective perspectives (Chung & Slater, 2013). Experiencing an out-group member's thoughts and emotions through narrative empathy is thus theorized to decrease out-group depersonalization and stereotyping by diminishing intergroup distance and humanizing the out-group member (Chung & Slater, 2013). I suggest that we can reconcile Chung and Slater's and Kidd and Castano's theories via the concept of sympathetic characters, which is defined by Chung and Slater to occur when we can imagine ourselves acting in similar ways to that character in the given situation (Chung & Slater, 2013). Chung and

Slater apply the caveat assumption of a sympathetic character to their theory about entertainment narratives: Given that the entertainment narrative provides realistic, sympathetic characters, entertainment narratives can promote empathy for stigmatized others. Other scholars have corroborated these theories and expanded the realm of narrative empathy to media in general with what they term the parasocial contact hypothesis. According to this theory, media exposure to positive ingroup-outgroup relations “provides an opportunity for parasocial contact that reinforces ingroup members’ attitudes of acceptance towards outgroup members” (Igartua & Frutos, 2017, p. 159). This is further clarified by Igartua and Frutos’s claim that such parasocial contact can occur “between a spectator who belongs to an ingroup and a fictional character who belongs to the outgroup,” suggesting that, indeed, empathizing with a fictional character can decrease stigma across group boundaries (Igartua & Frutos, 2017, p. 159). Therefore, since popular fiction, and especially science fiction such as *Steven Universe*, can provide the opportunity to parasocially engage with sympathetic and diverse outgroup characters in non-threatening social contexts that parallel and translate to real life, entertainment fiction can also act as a pathway to empathy and understanding stigmatized experiences.

A parallel argument emerging from the field of literary studies provides a similar view of narrative empathy’s effect on reducing outgroup stigma. Dr. Mary-Catherine Harrison applies the work of psychologist C. Daniel Batson, one of the leading researchers on empathy, to narrative. Harrison claims that empathizing with a character who is a member of a stigmatized group improves attitudes towards the whole group (Harrison, 2008). Further, she argues that empathizing with characters and with real people are not mutually exclusive, not a zero-sum game (Harrison, 2008). Therefore, psychologists agree with literary scholars that narrative fiction can increase empathy towards stigmatized outgroups through communicating the common human experiences of characters.

Building on these current theories of how narrative empathy works, we can combine two important elements: Harrison’s idea of empathizing with characters and real people not being a zero-sum game and Chung and Slater’s concept of fiction as a non-threatening context for empathy. Fictional narratives, by portraying the non-threatening perspective-taking context that Chung and Slater describe, provide the unique opportunity not to necessarily change beliefs and perceptions about stigmatized groups, but to *prime* audiences to be more open to seeing people who belong to that stigmatized group as human. In support of this claim, in psychology, nonconscious priming is “the process through which exposure to stimuli implicitly influences an ensuing behavior or response to subsequent stimuli” (Lowe et. al, 2019, p. 160). In other words, stimuli (such as narrative, for instance) can affect our behaviors *without our conscious awareness*. Of note is that both the studies performed by Chung and Slater

and Igartua and Frutos measured conscious biases through asking participants to report their beliefs. Thus, they only were able to see the effects of narrative empathy on *conscious* biases.

What I am proposing is that there is a nonconscious effect of taking the perspective of a stigmatized character that can manifest into later behavior. Accordingly applying that theory to narrative empathy, I argue that, while narrative empathy may not directly change beliefs for all parties, specifically for those with strong preconceived stereotypes (as noted by Chung and Slater and Igartua and Frutos), it may unconsciously prime them to be more receptive to a less stigmatized belief. In the following sections, we will look at what it takes to realize this priming of beliefs: an opportunity for manifestation in the real world, specifically through audience interaction and discussion.

### Criticisms of Narrative Empathy: The Paradox of Fiction

Here I want to reactivate the discussion of the paradox of fiction discussed above in order to lay the groundwork for how audiences can dodge that paradox through the unconscious manifestation of belief changes, which accordingly does not engage our conscious motivational hesitancy to empathize. Literary scholars have long touted the problem of the paradox of fiction in terms of transferring empathy for characters into real life. As seen briefly in the introduction, the paradox of fiction cites that the empathy induced by fiction cannot be acted upon, as we cannot aid fictional characters due to their intangible nature (Harrison, 2008). More formally, Harrison, quoting Robert Yanal, defines the Paradox of Fiction as follows: “[F]iction arouses emotion with motivational force, but with little or no opportunity to exercise it... This inability to intervene in characters’ lives (to alleviate distress, for instance) is one of the key differences between our emotional interactions with people and characters” (Harrison, 2008, p. 259). Extending this, Dr. Margrethe Bruun Vaage argues that it’s less morally risky to emotionally invest in fictional characters than real human beings (Vaage, 2013). Empathizing with a real person involves a moral obligation to help them, along with an accompanying moral guilt if or when one fails to help the real-life person. Thus, we may avoid situations where we need to empathize with real people in order to protect ourselves from that guilt (Vaage, 2013). Vaage further describes that fiction offers relief from the moral obligations that engaging in nonfiction entails, since fictional characters can’t be aided—a concept she calls *fictional relief* (Vaage, 2013). Keen corroborates this idea using the concept of *personal distress* in the face of another’s emotion (Keen, 2006). Keen, like Vaage, thus argues that, although self-focused personal distress can lead to avoidance of empathizing with real people, there is no such barrier in the realm of fiction. Harrison takes this further to address the concern that not only does narrative empathy “serve as an escape from real-life ethical demands,” it also allows readers “to congratulate themselves for feeling with fictional characters while



simultaneously doing nothing for people in need” (Harrison, 2008). However, as previously mentioned, Harrison responds to this criticism by pointing out that empathizing with fictional characters and real people is not a zero-sum game such that feeling for fictional characters precludes us from feeling with real people (Harrison, 2008). In fact, as we have seen in psychologists Kidd and Castano’s work on the Theory of Mind, reading fiction can increase our capacity to empathize in real-life contexts. However, in order for empathetic concern for a character to result in real-world empathy and altruistic action, “readers must interpret fictional characters to be representative of a social group that they identify in the world around them, i.e. a member of a group of people whom they can help because they are not fictional” (Harrison, 2008, p. 260). As such, not just any narrative can promote out-group empathy for every audience. Thus, the literature around the paradox of fiction has generally indicated that the main problem with narrative empathy—which I will address in the subsequent sections—is that it avoids the burden of moral obligation that nonfiction narratives possess.

Further delving into the mechanisms of empathy avoidance, psychologist Jamil Zaki has written that affective and material costs motivate people to avoid empathy. Taking the perspective and sharing the experience of others has an affective cost to the audience, since perceiving suffering makes us feel bad, even to the extent of resulting in depression in some cases (Zaki, 2014). Thus, we have a tendency to avoid situations that will make us feel bad. Suffering as Zaki defines it is akin to Keen’s concept of personal distress, and, thus, there is agreement between the two fields in terms of a personal stake in empathizing with fictional characters rather than real people. Material costs refer to burdens and barriers that are endemic with empathy such as making donations to charity (Zaki, 2014), and they are thus the material cognate to Vaage’s concept of fictional reliefs. Therefore, theories in psychology contextualize the motivational basis of the problem with the paradox of fiction: that people are more motivated to empathize with fictional characters over real personalities.

It is important to note that fiction by itself does not employ material costs<sup>8</sup> (as the characters are not material), though may be subject to lesser, but still existent, affective costs. This leads me to my second point: Fiction, due to its non-threatening context, overcomes the material and affective cost barriers that are cited by Vaage and Zaki to preclude empathizing with others in real life contexts.

I argue that this happens because, even though there still may be affective costs that occur through feeling with fictional characters (such as feeling sad or crying for the character’s plight or triumphs), there is no immediate, conscious pressure to feel like anything has to be done to help the character that belongs to a stigmatized group. This may sound like

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<sup>8</sup> It is prudent to mention that access to the entertainment medium and the mode of audience interaction through an internet connection can be a potential material cost—not a cost of action, but of the process that leads to action.

evidence for Vaage's claim that fiction precludes us of the moral responsibility to aid others in real life, but as we will see in the subsequent section, this is not the case due to the manifestation of the aforementioned unconscious priming of beliefs.

To summarize, scholars have warned that narrative empathy may not be transferable to real life due to the motivational barriers of both material costs such as donating and affective costs such as suffering and moral guilt that apply to real life, but not to fiction. However, this problem may be addressed through the unconscious manifestation of belief changes, which, due to the lack of conscious awareness of the process's occurrence, does not engage our conscious stigmatized beliefs (such as those reported by Igartua and Frutos and Chung and Slater) or our fight-or-flight senses of avoiding any possible demand for selfless action.

#### Revising the Paradox: How Fiction Translates to Reality

Now that we have set the stage of the current debate around the paradox of fiction, I will formulate a new conceptualization of narrative empathy, supported by a brief case study of the fan reactions to the TV show *Steven Universe* as a form of preliminary empirical evidence.

My case study will be building on previous work on *Steven Universe*, of which has focused on the show's queer representation providing a voice for minority experiences and thus for social change. For example, Eli Dunn writes that since within the magical fantasy world of *Steven Universe* the Gems possess the ability to change their gender presentation and appearance at will, the viewer accordingly suspends their disbelief in traditional binary views of gender and becomes more willing to believe in the gender spectrum that the Gems magically embody (Dunn, 2016). As such, Dunn argues that this "queer cartoon carnivalesque" space thus provides an avenue for understanding trans, nonbinary, and other nontraditional gender experiences in a way that is digestible even for those unfamiliar with those identities (Dunn, 2016). Mandy Elizabeth Moore takes this point further by arguing that *Steven Universe*, by providing a space for both children and adults to imagine and understand queer identities, empowers children and adults to "co-author" the real-life narrative of normalizing queerness (Moore, 2019). Regarding online fandom in particular, Jake Pitre delves into how the Tumblr fandom of *Steven Universe* is a space where fans come together and form a personal and collective identity around the text, identifying themselves as fans (Pitre, 2020). While Pitre notes that this collective fan identity can lead to fighting over ownership of the narrative (perhaps a case of perspective-taking at its most extreme form), he writes that it can also lead young people to unite together to launch community-based sociopolitical activism (Pitre, 2020). This work has detailed that there is an underlying function of queer activism and normalization present in the discourse surrounding *Steven Universe*, but it has thus far not accounted for *how* this activism takes place.

As such, the case study I present here will expand upon this previous work by looking at how online fan discourse described in previous *Steven Universe* studies translates to real-life decreases in stigma. To begin, I emphasize that fiction does not exist in a vacuum; there will always be an audience that reads or watches the narrative, and thus there will always be an opportunity for social engagement and discourse surrounding the narrative. Audiences interact with narratives by discussing the content and humanization of stigmatized characters, especially through engaging in social conversation over the internet through fandoms and memes. For example, fans of *Steven Universe* often discuss the positive representations of racial and LGBTQ+ minorities and people with disabilities in its well-developed and lovable characters (“Steven Universe”). For instance, one fan wrote, “The show really celebrates diversity in a way that feels totally natural” and that their conservative friend “who is always on about how entertainment is ‘always pushing a liberal agenda’ ... doesn't feel like they are pushing an agenda; [they’re] just spreading what the Crystal Gems believe in on the show,” (“Steven Universe”). Here, we can see that *Steven Universe*’s portrayal of minority representation as a normal fact of life was even able to reach those who may not have already been accepting of minorities (in this case, the fan’s conservative friend) and show them in a natural way that minorities are simply human, just like everyone else.

Further, another fan writes directly about the capacity of the show to teach empathy: “Flashbacks, stories and other sequences abound [help] explain how and why the characters behave the way they do ...there's always a strong moral lesson about putting yourself in other people's shoes” (“Steven Universe”). Here, we can see evidence of perspective-taking and how that allows audiences to identify with characters, just as Chung and Slater postulated.

Beyond these responses, fans have also generated their own content in response to the show in the form of sharing memes on social media, such as Twitter and Tumblr, in order to promote the themes of acceptance from the show in real life contexts to the wider audience that social media affords. For example, the meme below (and one I personally quite enjoy) shows Garnet, one of the characters in *Steven Universe*, literally punching sense into racism.



FIGURE 1. A meme posted by @marynotari on Twitter with the caption “A queer space rock of color punches out a racist pig.”

Interestingly, this meme was posted in 2015, but it has gained more traction and has started trending on Twitter more recently with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement with George Floyd’s death in May of 2020. This just goes to show that the priming resulting from narrative empathy requires a social context and opportunity in which to exercise and discuss it, in this case the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

*Steven Universe* is a show meant for kids. As psychologist Sherryl Graves has stated, “[t]elevised role portrayals and interracial interactions, as sources of vicarious experience, contribute to the development of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination among children” (Graves, 1995, p. 707). Supporting this, studies have found that children’s television viewing correlates with the learning of stereotypes (McGhee & Frueh, 1980). However, the opposite then would, logically, also hold true: that children can also form positive notions if they are exposed to humanized representations of traditionally stereotyped groups. Thus, I argue that one way to address the problem of preconceived notions brought up by Chung and Slater and Igartua and Frutos is to normalize diversity for young children *before those negative stereotypes and preconceived notions even form in the first place*.

Moreover, all of these examples go to show that the more people interact and talk with each other about a belief, the more people will support it, since we have a tendency to put more faith into beliefs that we recognize in many others, as a form of what social psychologist Robert Cialdini calls the principle of social proof. To put the concept of social proof into Cialdini’s words, we “decide what to believe or how to act in a situation” by “look[ing] at what other people are believing or doing there”

(Cialdini, 2009, p. 138). *It is in this way that the audience manifests that unconscious priming into actual decreases in stigmatized beliefs that transfer to reality.*

Further, the moral paradox of fiction cited by Vaage is not a contradiction, since a) as Harrison stated, empathizing with characters and real people are not exclusive and b) as I've argued here, fiction is not disconnected, as if in a vacuum, from reality, such that beliefs primed through fiction can never bleed into our conscious efforts and behaviors in real life.

To support this last point, I cite a concrete example of the transference of beliefs to reality: an opportunity where fans of *Steven Universe* donated to the Black Lives Matter movement. The creator of *Steven Universe*, Rebecca Sugar, mobilized fans of the show through Twitter in August of 2020 to donate to an organization called National Bail Out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Sugar, 2020a). The charity event raised a total of \$107,109.95 with the donation matching from Cartoon Network (Sugar, 2020b). As can be seen here, fiction can be a medium through which beliefs and ideas spread, correlating with real altruistic actions in the world.

### Conclusion: Fiction, Altruism, and Activism

To synthesize the argument here, I first reviewed the empirical evidence of narrative empathy's effect on decreasing stigma, which I then contextualized with the arguments and theories of why such empirical interventions were successful. I then addressed the caveat that narrative fiction may provide moral relief from the burden of taking empathetic action in real life and may discourage transference of the decrease in stigma to real life contexts by adding the theoretical framework of audience engagement as a factor that takes latent primed beliefs from fiction and translates them into real actions – a view I supported with the case study of *Steven Universe*.

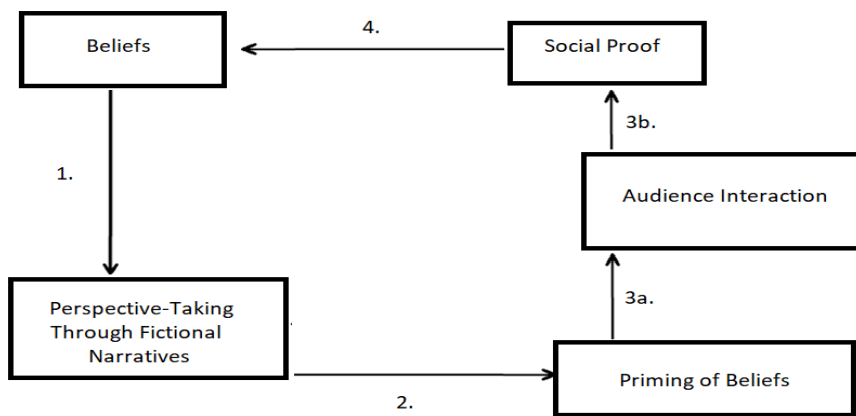


FIGURE 2. A visual representation of the interactions in the proposed model of narrative empathy.

To review, I will present the four theoretical interactions that I have demonstrated and built on this paper:

1. Audiences come into situations with a set of beliefs, which they will use as a lens to take the perspective of fictional characters.
2. Taking the perspective of a sympathetic character that belongs to a stigmatized group humanizes the character and the social group they belong to, which thus affords the priming of changing stigmatized beliefs.
3. The primed destigmatized beliefs manifest into reality through (a) audience interaction and discussion of the belief, of which (b) facilitates and cements the belief through its emergence as social proof.
4. Lastly, the beliefs supported by social proof become avenues for actions in real life by revising our previously held beliefs. It is in this way that the paradox of fiction can be resolved, as empathizing with characters *does* result in behavioral changes in real life. Further, entertainment fiction can be a particularly strong agent of social change, as its perceived surface-level lack of affective and material costs invites audiences to engage with it, unlike perhaps more directly demanding activist campaigns.

Fiction is never without an audience. As such, that audience, through interaction with the beliefs presented in the fiction, can manifest those mindset changes into reality. While the example I provided here, *Steven Universe*, has promoted a positive decrease in stigma to reality, *that is not to say that all fiction results in a beneficial transference to reality*. It is easy to see that fiction can just as easily have negative effects on reality as well, particularly when portrayals of members of stigmatized groups are stereotypical and unsympathetic (as opposed to sympathetic characters as Chung and Slater described). For example, stereotypes of mental illness in movies often “contribute to the stigmatization of mentally ill persons,” since they depict them as “homicidal maniac[s], narcissistic parasite[s], and zoo specimen” (Hyler et. al, 1991). It is thus important to consider both the potential positive benefits and negative consequences of narrative empathy in entertainment in equal measure.

Moving forward, I suggest that the fields of literary studies and psychology shift their focus towards considering the broader social context of audience engagement when researching narrative empathy. Currently, much of the field of narrative empathy has been focusing on literary fiction, which has no doubt been illuminating. However, I suggest that the field also consider popular media, which has been created within the context and time period that it is being engaged with, and thus pertains to current stereotypes and stigma. I believe that this will further illuminate the lack of a true paradox of fiction, particularly given the size of the

audience interaction made possible by social media that helps propel fiction into action.

I want to end this essay with a personal note, in hopes that it might illuminate why the potential power of narrative empathy as activism—when used with these caveats in mind—that I’ve argued for in this paper matters. Growing up in a small, white rural town, I didn’t know that LGBTQ+ identities even existed for a large part of my childhood. It really wasn’t until I saw positive representation through shows like *Steven Universe* that I realized the distinction between characters and caricatures. Fiction like *Steven Universe* simply depicts being “different” as normal—there is no need to humanize the characters, *since they had never been depicted as anything less than human*. It wasn’t until I experienced fiction like this that I began to understand and value identities other than my own, and to recognize and inhibit the implicit associations I had been making all my life about myself and others. Where reality is confined by its norms and labels, fiction like *Steven Universe* has shown me—in my full pajama-clad and couch-potato-ed glory—something that our fast-paced lives sometimes obscure: that despite our differences and defenses, at the end of the day, we all see the same starry sky, 3 AM or otherwise. And what a beautiful sky it is.

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