# Women's reading constructs and their impact on reading behaviours

**Abstract**

Despite the real and perceived benefits of reading—cognitive, social and psychological—many women do not choose to read, particularly books, as a regular leisure activity.  In this paper, using empirical evidence and personal construct psychology[1] as the framework, it is argued that women develop reading constructs that, by the time of adolescence, become core constructs forming part of the self-concept that remain stable throughout the life span.  These constructs are shaped by the individual's environment, particularly family and friends, and influence their perception of their reading behaviour and skills.  When considering the reading construct, it is a common belief that a reader is someone who reads books and a non-reader is someone who either reads nothing or reads other materials, e.g., magazines.  A woman who believes herself to be a reader may read books throughout her lifespan, whereas a woman who believes herself to be a non-reader will probably not read books after her primary schooling is completed.  Women who consider themselves to be non-readers may change their reading behaviour as adults if there are certain conditions present to encourage them to start, but they exercise limited agency in their reading practices.

**Keywords**: Constructs, reading, socialisation, women

**Introduction**

For this paper reading is restricted to the reading of print books and periodicals (magazines and newspapers) undertaken for leisure and pleasure.  The definition of reading for pleasure is taken from Clark and Rumbold (2006):

> Reading for pleasure refers to reading that we do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading.  It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else's request we continue because we are interested in it.  It typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us (p. 1).

Throughout individuals' lifespans their reading activity has been shown to go through cycles that reflect their lifestage. Table 1 shows the percentage of the population that read on a daily basis by age group, based on Great Britain's National Statistics Time Use Survey 2005 and the work of Clark and Foster for the National Literacy Trust in 2005.

**Table 1: Reading throughout the lifespan: percentage of population reading daily by age**
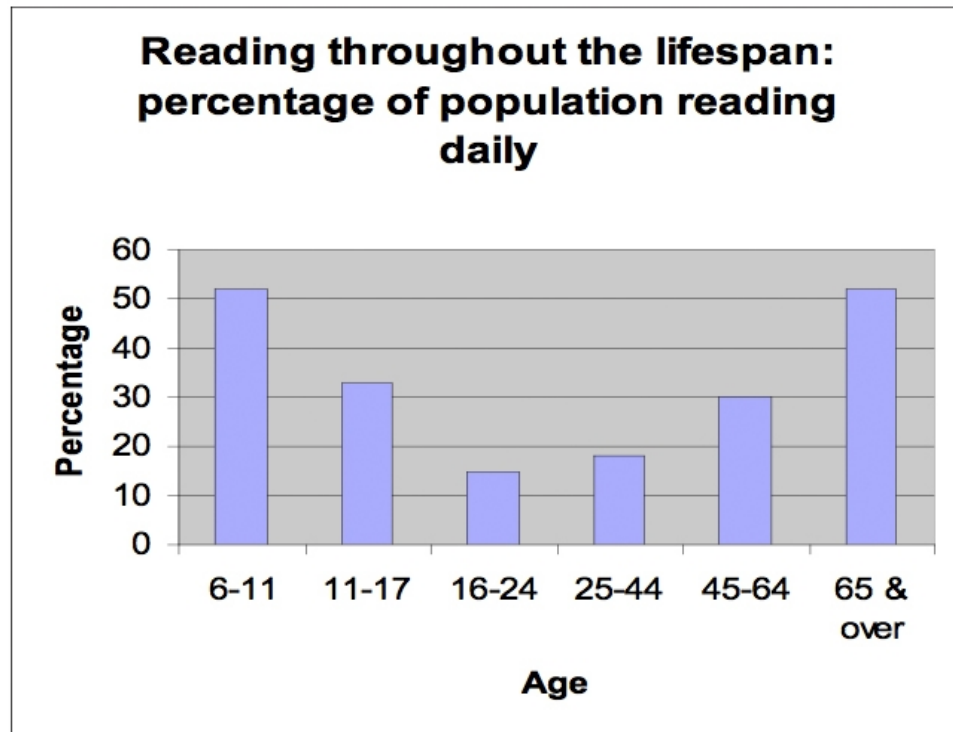


As can be seen, there is a decrease in reading activity between primary and secondary school and on leaving school. From the age of 25, the percentage of the population reading starts to increase, slowly up to the age of 64 and then dramatically over 65, to reach the same percentage as those at primary school. If figures were taken for monthly rather than daily reading, the percentages would be larger, but the trends would remain the same. It is claimed, for example, by the Skills for Life Survey 2003 that up to 99% of the population read at least monthly. These reading activity changes have been noted in many reports and are due mainly to lifestage and amount of time available for reading. The main factors in determining the amount of reading undertaken is presence of children in the home (Book Marketing Limited, 2000; Mintel, 2003, 2004), number of hours worked (Great Britain, 2000, 2005) and increasingly active social life (BML, 2000, 2005).

It is argued in this paper that this change in reading habits and behaviour is not only affected by lifestyle but by how a woman construes herself as a reader. Those who think of themselves as readers are likely to read throughout their lifespan whatever their lifestage, but those who consider themselves to be non-readers will probably not read books after primary schooling is completed. This reading construct is a core construct that remains stable throughout life and forms part of an individual's self-concept; it influences a woman's perception of her reading behaviour and skills. A woman who considers herself to be a non-

reader may start to read books if certain conditions are present to encourage her to start, but she will exercise limited agency in her reading practices.

These conclusions are drawn from both the literature and empirical evidence. Empirical evidence was collected from fourteen women of one family aged eighteen to ninety-four years old, born into four generations spanning the twentieth century. (Table 2 below shows the sample, including date of birth and whether they construe themselves to be readers or non-readers.)

**Table 2: Sample involved in the study, showing relationships to each other and date of birth and whether they consider themselves to be readers or non-readers.**

| 1st generation | 2nd generation | 3rd generation | 4th generation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elsie (1906 – 2003)<br><br>Non-reader | Dorothy (b1930)<br><br>Reader | | |
| | Pauline (b1933)<br><br>Reader | Amanda (b1957)<br><br>Reader | Emily (b1983)<br><br>Non-reader |
| | Judith (b1935)<br><br>Non-reader | Sarah (b1958)<br><br>Non-reader | |
| | | Joanne (b1967)<br><br>Non-reader | |
| | Catherine (b1940)<br><br>Non-reader | Veronica (b1977)<br><br>Non-reader | |
| | | Ellie (b1979)<br><br>Non-reader | |
| | Brenda (b1944)<br><br>Non-reader | | |
| | Mary (b1944)<br><br>Non-reader | Molly (b1976)<br><br>Reader | |

The information was collected using an ethnographic interview of between two and six hours and a self-characterisation. The data was analysed using Personal Construct Theory. Of the 14 women, four considered themselves to be readers and 10 non-readers. Of the 10 who considered themselves to be non-readers, nine read regularly or occasionally and one never reads anything. The names of the women have been altered.

**The reading construct**

*Readers* are considered by the respondents to be those people who read books, and *non-readers* those people who do not read books.  Even if people read periodicals, which many of the respondents did, this is not considered to be 'reading' by the sample.

> … I mean my memory of reading is that I was not a reader… I mean I regret it now, I really regret it 'cause I enjoy books, I love books, and I think if only I had opened these books and started them I would have got so much out of it. … (Mary).

> I don't read much at all, I mainly watch the television.  I shouldn't really … I should read more really, I like reading but I just don't read.  I just never think about reading (Veronica).

The reading construct is thus clearly defined and there is a limited range of convenience[2], i.e. books. Reading is the superordinate[3] construct that forms part of the self-concept, but there are subordinate constructs associated with it—the attributes of a reader, someone who has

- a wide vocabulary

- more advanced literacy skills

- more general and cultural knowledge

- better concentration and attention

- a good memory

- more education, either formally or informally

These have been subsumed into the superordinate construct of reader.

> People who read a lot have a larger vocabulary and write better… (Pauline)

> She [still reads] she is a good reader, she has a good vocabulary (Mary talking about her daughter Molly).

It is not surprising that there is a limited range of convenience for the reading construct and that it is books, as society as a whole considers "reading" to be "reading books."  When we start reading, it is from books; books are used to reinforce reading at school; and when reading is discussed in the media, it is in relation to books, e.g. the *Read On* campaign.

The subordinate elements (identified above) are those that have been identified in several research studies as being linked to those people who read books (Radway, 1987; Gold, 1990; West, Stanovich &

Mitchell, 1993; Gorard, Fevre & Rees, 1999; Lyons, 1999; Datta & Macdonald-Ross, 2002; Duffy, 2004; Rebuck, 2004).

The respondents did not consider the elements of a non-reader in detail, with the exception of poorer literacy skills and the lack of ability to concentrate.

> … I do not read a lot of books as I lose my concentration easily … I can not concentrate.  I was getting into it [*Memoirs of a Geisha*] but it is hard to get back into the story when there are other things to do… [I am] not a terrific book reader, [I will] maybe start one recommended but do not finish it due to distractions…  [I] do not pick it up [again] as [I] can not remember [the] story. … [I have] never finished a book and thought WOW, in fact I do think I have finished a book (Emily)

Irwin (2003) suggests that reading identity is a core construct and that this develops from perceived competence in reading.  Attempts to alter constructs concerning reading identity can lead to hostility as learners seek to protect their threatened personal constructs (p. 31).

With the exception of one, respondents in this sample did not remember any difficulties in learning to read. Their reading competence developed "normally" or even at an earlier age than their contemporaries.  It seems that the development of their reading construct was dependent on their socialisation process, particularly role modelling and identification rather than perceived reading competence.  Once they defined themselves as a reader or a non-reader, they appear to have incorporated some or most of the associated subordinate constructs. These may have become more differentiated and defined in adolescence through maturation and learning, reinforced by their experiences at school and in their communities.

**Development of reading construct**

The majority of respondents learned to read at school, with encouragement from their nuclear and extended family members.  Literacy is valued by all respondents, as is reading.  Literacy and reading is viewed as being related to books rather than periodicals or other reading materials, so the reading of books was encouraged, but not necessarily periodicals.

When the children were learning to read (at primary school), they received active encouragement to read, the mother normally reading with or to them and, on occasion, the father.  As the children became independent readers, this active involvement ceased for many, and the encouragement to read books, if there was any, became more passive. Children were encouraged to read when they had no other activity, such as whilst travelling or prior to going to bed.  Role modelling and identification with the parent/s or siblings became more important for the children.

Of those who became periodical readers and consider themselves to be non-readers, their role models in the home were periodical readers. As reading and literacy is related to books they were not actively

encouraged to read periodicals but read them by imitation or because they were available.

> … [my sister] passed me *Red Star, Family Star, Red Letter*.  And I think I got
> hooked on them through them being passed on, but when they [weren't] passed
> on, … , I started buying them, ordering them, as you had to order them from the
> paper shop  (Brenda)

Other studies (Hall & Coles, 1999) have found that during adolescence periodical reading increases as book reading decreases, and there are more periodicals available in the home.

Dekovic and Meeus (1997, p. 174) found that the "father's behaviour toward the adolescent is of a greater importance than the mother's with regard to self-concept development and the development of peer relations" and suggested that:

> It is possible that the role of the father in child-rearing becomes more pronounced
> during adolescence. … Given the fact that the adolescents are at the threshold of
> their entrance to society, it is possible that the father in his role of "the link to the
> outside world" increases in importance as a socializing agent for this transitional
> period.

The majority of the respondents' fathers read periodicals in the home and so may have provided a more important role model than the mother (who read books) during this period. if Dekovic and Meeus are correct in their suggestion that the father's role becomes more pronounced during adolescence.

> I do not recollect anybody reading except my dad and do not remember any books
> being in the house, except an encyclopaedia that we used to look at a lot and fight
> over it. … My father encouraged me to read, he encouraged us to learn.  … as I
> was the one most closely associated with my dad who was an avid reader …I can
> not say if he encouraged me or not,…  (Pauline)

Following primary school, the predominance of periodical reading both in the home and amongst peers and the diminution of book reading influenced and altered the reading behaviours of most of the respondents.  They turned away from books in favour of periodicals even if they enjoyed reading books in primary school.  Their role models outside of the school were too strong; they needed identification both with their family and peers, who were important reference points for their behaviour, and the culture of their home (particularly their father) and peers was one of periodical reading.

For those women who did not reject books in favour of magazines and continued book reading from primary school through adolescence into adulthood, the nuclear family (parents) provided a strong culture of reading books and periodicals.  It was a culture of active involvement in book reading; by sharing the outcomes of reading, they had role models for book reading in the home and identified with these role models. They internalised their role models' reading values and developed a self-concept of being a reader.

> My mother encouraged us to read – if we were bored she would say "why don't
> you go and read a book", but mainly by example.  It was something we did
> together, we would all read a book.  If we went away, we went camping as children
> and we would often sit at night and we would all read a book.  Dad would be
> reading the paper and we would all be reading a book (Amanda).

The majority of respondents, therefore, as children internalised the cultural values of their family and their peers regarding reading.  The reading of books to or with the children, and the encouragement of reading, was normally undertaken by the mother. Very few of the sample were read to by their father on a regular basis or encouraged to read books by their father.  This is a common finding, with the mother being responsible for the early development of reading in the home.  In addition, the choice of reading materials is gendered; when book reading did occur in the home for these respondents, it was normally the mothers who read books for leisure. Fathers in the sample read newspapers and periodicals, with very few reading books.

**The influence of school**

For these respondents, expectations of the formal educational process are related to the period in time that they attended school and their children attended school.  Changes in expectations occurred across the twentieth century in line with changes in the educational system and educational practices.

Overall, the respondents demonstrated ambivalence toward school; no real engagement and a divorce of school and home.  "I mean you went to school and plodded on, did what you did and went home" (Brenda).  There were no expectations of the school in terms of future career direction, and the expectation from the family of the older generations was to work when schooling officially ended.  "I wanted to be a nursery nurse, but I had to get a job … Well families, in that day and age …" (Judith).  "… we were not channelled into anything, not even at home" (Brenda).  These attitudes extended toward the reading of books, with most of the sample reading what was expected of them "to get by" and no more.  Very few of the sample read outside of the school environment; even if they took books home, they did not read them following primary school.  Books became a part of school and not a part of daily life, where for many, the periodical was the main medium read.

At secondary school, reading books was turned into work. With the critical analysis of books, it became a functional activity further reinforcing internalised attitudes towards reading: the reading of books was not undertaken for leisure and pleasure.

> To me reading is purely pleasure, nothing else. I enjoy reading.  To start taking it apart, what did he mean here, what did he mean there, I do not want to know.  I just take my interpretation, it satisfies me, and I enjoy it and that is all I want.  I think that man wrote that so that we could enjoy it, not to take it apart to find all the hidden meanings.  If they wanted you to find hidden meanings they would not hide them.  This is why I think it is just educationalists doing these things to make themselves look good.  They have written it for your enjoyment  (Pauline).

Book reading became "work"; it had to be undertaken to pass examinations. Therefore, the reinforcement was external—in Millard's terms (1998, p. 45), "there was a mismatch between pupils' expectations of the importance of reading and its perceived use in school."

The attitudes of the children themselves toward school and reading in school appear to be similar across the generations, even taking into account the changes across the century in school practices and the beliefs of the parents.  For very few was reading for pleasure encouraged by the school, and when it was, this appears to be due to individual teachers rather than the system.

At primary school a reading community is often established and the pleasure of reading is encouraged. By secondary school this has turned reading into work, and for many this reading is not compatible with their personal constructs.  There is a mismatch between not only pupils' expectations of reading in school and its importance, but also between parents' expectations of their children's reading in school and the encouragement of reading and what actually occurs.  The school is still perceived as having the main responsibility for encouraging literacy by the parents, or at least for supporting the parents in their home schooling of literacy.

**Changing reading behaviour**

It is possible to change reading habits during either late adolescence or adulthood from being periodical readers or non-readers to becoming book readers.  For this to occur there is normally a critical incidence involving:

- the individual having "more time" than usual; and

- for many, coming into contact with another adult who introduced them or re-introduced them to the reading of books.  This adult would normally have been a reader themselves and have given the respondent a book to read.  Although they could have chosen to "fill" this time with another activity, they chose to read the book that was given to them.

> I used to go and visit [my sister] and she would be reading, so I would get a book and read it … I think what has happened is that people have put books my way that I have liked reading…. I think [my sister] really got me into reading more than I should (Catherine).

> Thinking back to reading a proper book was when I worked at … and it was a bad season and the weather wasn't very good and I was on the ticket, cashier.  … there was a lady worked in the changing rooms and she used to come over, obviously we used to get together and, with the lifeguards and that, and chatter and that, and she was reading a book one day and I said "Oh, what you reading?" … She said "You can borrow it if you like when I have finished it, I'll bring it in, cause there are others that follow".  And she brought it in and I read it, and it was interesting and I really got into it.  [Then] she brought me the whole [series], while we were there that summer, cause the weather was bad.  And you sit, you know what a lido is like, you just sit with nothing to do.  I used to knit.  And I sat and read… about 4 or 5 [books] and that is, I think, basically was my introduction to reading a proper full book (Brenda).

> … I first started reading for pleasure, was before I went to college actually, it was between time.  I was in Greece and um, because Angela had met me and Angela was the one who got me into reading and she gave me the Tom Sharpe books and they are the first novels that I probably read, in that I would go and find the next one.  … I was around then, yeah, it was maybe when I was doing my A levels.  It was Angela that got me into reading, but literally by giving me books right, not by suggesting but by giving (Joanne).

These people experienced a combination of spending time with a reader and having more time to read. For some this behaviour has continued; they will read books friends give them. One respondent summed up her behaviour by saying, "maybe I read to find out what these people are thinking" (Joanne).  At this point in time identification with the other person is strong, and the sociality corollary can be used to explain this behaviour.  According to Kelly (1955, pp. 95-102), this is the extent to which one person construes the construction processes of another, which enables them to play a role in a social process involving the other person.  By reading, the non-reader will be able to become involved in the reading of the reader. For non-readers to change their behaviour there must be some other attributes of the reader, other than reading alone, that they respect.

For one respondent, it was her husband whom she identified with, although he did not physically give her books to read.

> I think, I started reading, … when I gave up work and I used to read when I went to bed at night. … and [my husband] used to read, he used to read in bed.  He did a lot of reading.  And we had lots of reading books about the house … I probably started [reading in bed] as he read in bed and I found it very relaxing, instead of just going to sleep it was one way of relaxing and unwinding (Mary).

Others were given books by their mother. Their change in behaviour could be due to the psychological maturation process and the changing relationship between mother and child.

Those who have changed their reading habits often do not make conscious reading decisions regarding what books they read; they will not read unless they are physically given a book by someone else, such as a family member or friend.

> I don't particularly buy books myself as people will pass them round and you have a lot give[n to] you (Brenda)

> I borrow, I am given them by friends and family … So I get them from friends, family, my partner, my daughter (Mary)

Readers who do not choose their own books tend to be irregular readers or those who started reading books in late adolescence or adulthood.  They are not confident readers; they are dependent on other people either for recommendations of what to read or for being given books to read. They are continuing their behaviour from when they started reading books; they have not taken responsibility for choosing their own reading materials, but have given the control of their reading to other people.  This restricts the range of books that they read, and Catherine, in particular has recognised this:

> I will read a book if someone gives it to me. … I think what has happened is that people have put books my way that I have liked reading … [but I don't read any other types of books as] nobody has put them my way (Catherine).

Their agency in this respect was given to another person who looked after their interests: "you have got to read this book, it is quite good," or "they know what kind of books I like."  It is rare for many of these respondents to purchase books for themselves, and when they contemplate it, they do not know how to choose a book.

> I am not good at going into a bookstore and picking my own books.  If I ever do that … you could give me a gift token for £50 for books and I probably would never

> use unless you take me to the bookstore. Cause I don't know where to start….
> Sometimes I have bought books from the airport lounge when waiting to go on
> holiday. I look in the bestsellers and that is how I would choose a book. Look in
> the top 10, go from 1 to six and pick the first one that looks as though it interests
> me. I am intimidated by bookstores – oh I don't know what to read. I don't know
> where to start. I don't remember the name of the authors of half of what I have
> read. I need a chaperone …Occasionally I do buy books, from bargain places –
> the Book Warehouse. I buy all kinds of books, not necessarily novels. I may read
> an Oprah recommendation, I need a recommendation. I can not shoot in the dark.
> (Joanne)

They feel that they need help selecting the books that they could be reading. They do not remember what they have already read, which could be due to not making a conscious decision to read a particular book originally and could lead to purchasing a book they have already read. They feel intimidated by bookshops and the wide range of books; it is difficult to differentiate between one book and another. Clues are often used to locate books that might be of interest, such as the "top 10 bestsellers," which are often on display in bookshops and other places that sell books, or recommendations by celebrities or media book clubs. In this case the responsibility for choosing a book is given to a person who is not a "trusted" friend or relative.

Some of the respondents in the sample would not read a book if one were not given to them, but for others it is not clear whether they would read or not should their source of books "dry up." If they were to purchase books, then their choice would still probably remain restricted to those recommended in other ways. This is not uncommon amongst the general population, as the sales of recommended books and books in general increase following discussion on media book clubs; such clubs have guided the populations' reading.

**Summary**

The respondents in this sample, generally, reflect national reading habits in terms of what they read and the time they spend reading. The relationship between their variables of age, lifestyle, and gender were congruent with national trends.

Only five in the sample developed reading habits in early childhood and maintained them throughout their lifespan; four are book readers and one doesn't read. Nine changed their reading habits from school into adolescence, moving from books to periodicals, whilst the remaining five continued with their childhood reading patterns. By this stage their reading construct was well developed and had become part of their self-concept, thereby becoming resistant to change.

The major influences on the development of the reading construct, and hence habits, were the nuclear family and peers; the reading culture of the family and identification with individual members of the family and friends. School had little influence over the formation of the reading construct or reading habits, although a link was found between habits and literacy skills; those with sustained book reading habits had greater literacy skills.

Of the nine who changed their reading habits in adolescence, seven changed again during adulthood, showing that reading habits are amenable to change, but there has to be a "critical incident" for this change to occur. This critical incident has to involve an increase in time available for reading (i.e., an

increase in unstructured or leisure time) and also normally involves having contact with a book reader and that book reader encouraging reading by example and, normally, by giving the non-book-reader a book to read.  Identification with the book reader is important in influencing the non-book-reader to read the book given to them and also in encouraging further book reading. Even if reading behaviour changes, the reading construct remains the same, so the individual still thinks of herself as a non-reader.  Alternatively, if the individual has a defined dichotomy corollary for reading, the maturation process may allow her to move from one element to the other.

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[1] Personal construct theory is a theory of personality and motivation based on the philosophy of constructive alternativism.  "This principle asserts that reality does not directly reveal itself to us, but rather it is subject to as many alternative ways of construing it as we ourselves can invent.  Hence the variety of human experience" (Adams-Webber, 1979, p. 1)  From this Kelly suggests "man-the-scientist" (1955, p. 4), whereby he is "ever seeking to predict and control the course of events with which he is involved.  He has theories, tests his hypotheses, and weighs experiemental evidence."  From these acts people develop templates (constructs) to aid their predictive behaviour (1955, p. 12).  Each individual develops coherent systems of constructions, which provide unity in the experience of each individual and make them unique.

[2] Range of convenience refers to one of Kelly's eleven corollaries (propositions), range. "A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only.  There are few constructs that are relevant to everything, most have a focus." (Kelly, 1955)

[3] Each person has a hierarchical system of constructs, with some constructs subsuming others; these constructs are termed superordinal and the subsumed construct becomes the subordinal (Kelly, 1955).

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