'Six Research Reports, Five Repertoires, One Repertoire Matrix: Talking about contemporary reading group experiences'

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Six Research Reports, Five Repertoires, One Repertoire Matrix: Talking about contemporary reading group experiences

Abstract

How can we talk about the differences within and about reading groups? The purpose of our research project is to devise a course for reading group facilitators. That is why we studied the ways into which researchers talk about contemporary reading groups meeting in their free time and in physical environments. First, we have been able to reconstruct five different repertoires: the Historical, the Social, the Cultural, the Transformative, and the Narrative. We argue that the differences in interpretation show the evolution in reading groups and that each repertoire can be linked to a phase of Turner's process. Finally, we have constructed a Repertoire Matrix through which reading group readers and facilitators can frame different reading group practices and which offers a vocabulary to discuss diversification within the network of reading groups.

Keywords: Narratives, reading groups, discursive psychology, rhetorical analysis, narrative inquiry

At the Beyond the Book conference (University of Birmingham, 2007), we were treated to a variety of debates on reading groups offering different definitions. As it is the aim of our research to develop a course for reading group facilitators, we set out to make these differences more explicit. The following questions structure our research:

- Which characteristics do researchers focus on to define the reading group experience?
- Which features give rise to contrasting research findings?
- How can we understand these contrasts?
- Which vocabulary do we need to make sense of these differences?

We devised a research methodology starting from discourse analysis based on the interpretive repertoires theory (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). We looked for recurring key terms to pinpoint the defining characteristics and dichotomies to circumscribe the opposing features. We proceeded to structure these

into categories that equate the components of the minimal story: *Agent, Act, Agency, Scene* and *Purpose* (Bruner, 1986; 2004). Finally, we applied the rhetorical analysis method of the Dramatist Pentad (Burke, 1945) to create a rhetorical construct that allows us both to differentiate as well as to clarify the link between the different repertoires. Thus we came up with five repertoires: the Historical, the Social, the Cultural, the Transformative, and the Narrative.

First, we reconstruct the Historical vocabulary, which hinges on the opposition between the right reading practices at universities done by male academics as a professional activity versus the 'light' reading at home done by the disqualified solitary female reader in her leisure time. In this discourse, the arguments concerning place and time initiate the debate, making *Scene* the Ancestral Principle within this repertoire.

Next, we argue that the essence of the contemporary reading group has to be understood through the imbalance between *Scene* on the one hand and *Act, Agency, Agent*, and *Purpose* on the other. Indeed, reading groups convene most often at home, but they respectively defy the solitary reading practice, the literary reading mode, the existing reader's identities, and the readers' intention of creating their own story. Each mismatch is translated into a repertoire, which can be located within a Repertoire Matrix that functions as a lens through which we can formulate our thoughts about the reading group.

Thus, the Social discourse assembles the points of view related to the importance of convening as readers. This Social repertoire starts from the Principle *Act*. The discussion featuring the arguments for and against the right reading mode, the right book, and the proper analyses are clustered within the Cultural repertoire, foregrounding the Principle *Agency*. All contentions concerning effect on the reader's identity are allocated to the Principle *Agent*, from which the Transformative vocabulary is derived. And finally we have developed a Narrative repertoire, which looks at how readers narrate the self. The Principle *Purpose* sets off this discourse.

The relationship between the five repertoires exemplifies Turner's liminal process, the Historical Repertoire representing the canonical state that is breached by the Social Repertoire. The Cultural Repertoire delineates the crisis, and the Transformative and Narrative Repertoires sketch the creation of a new legitimacy. The genre of the narrative about these repertoires corresponds to the structure of the *Bildungsroman*.

Research Design: Scope, Method and Purpose

Scope

We have limited this study to analyses of contemporary women's reading groups meeting in physical spaces as a leisure activity. This leaves us with six academic texts to be analyzed.[1] The research reports were all published within a period of six years, from Devlin-Glass in 2001 to Burwell in 2007, with 2003 as focal year.

To define the ongoing debate, we mapped the researchers to their field of expertise, situating reading group research both within the same tradition of the humanities as well as between a variety of disciplines such as arts, sociology, and communication, with a preference for qualitative — more specific focus groups, interviews and questionnaires — research methods. Geographically. the research community is situated in the USA, Australia, Canada, and the UK.

Method

We have devised a research methodology combining discourse analysis based on the interpretive repertoires theory (Potter & Wetherell, 1995) with narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1986; 2004) and rhetorical analysis following the principles of the Dramatist Pentad (Burke, 1945). First, we will briefly explain why we combine these methods, then we will discuss each of them separately, and finally we will put forward how we have proceeded with our analysis.

Discursive psychology, narrative inquiry, and rhetorical analysis all start from language as meaning-making device. They construct a concept of meaning that is layered. Discursive psychology states that people rely on previous registers; that there are dominant repertoires and that people choose from different discourses to formulate their way of talking about reality. Narrative inquiry asserts that people create their stories based on the existing tales within their culture, and Burke's rhetorical analysis addresses the need of people to identify with existing vocabularies. So we want to discern the layers within the definition of "the reading group" and increase the level of detail used in the definition. How do we talk about reading groups? Next, we add more information by asking how we construct stories about them. And finally we inquire how one persuades a reading group member to adopt or change this narrative according to lines of similarity and difference.

We see these approaches as complementary methods of analysis, as is implied by Potter and Wetherell, who define rhetoric as "the use of discourse to persuasive effect" (1987, p. 187). Potter and Wetherell (1987) introduced the concept of an "interpretive repertoire": "basically a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (p. 138). Interpretive repertoires are ways to talk about reality; they don't describe reality as such but create versions of it depending on the context of the speaker. These versions, however, are not idiosyncratic, because people choose from the

discourses that are already available to them. Speakers most often combine different repertoires to construct an account of a particular phenomenon and can vary their selection according to the situation. Within this paper we will discuss five repertoires, starting from the dominant Historical Repertoire to the countering Social, Cultural, Transformative and Narrative Repertoires.

According to both Burke (1945) and Bruner (2004), the minimal story structure consists of *Agent, Act, Agency, Scene, Purpose* and drama, which is caused by a 'mismatch between two or more of the five constituents' (Bruner, 2004, p. 697). Bruner quotes Turner to specify "trouble": "an initial canonical state is breached, redress is attempted which, if it fails, leads to crisis; crisis, if unresolved, leads eventually to a new legitimate order" (Turner, 1982, cited in Bruner, 2004, p. 697). Troubles are also "individual embodiments of deeper cultural crises" (Bruner, 2004, p. 697).

Bruner relies on Rorty's work to distinguish different levels of *Agency*: how much the *Agent* owns or forms his own experience. *Agents* can be defined as a mere function within a plot without, or unaffected by, experiences of their own, or as persons who are defined by their roles in society: "selves who must compete for their roles in order to earn their rights" or "individuals" who "transcend," "resist," or "rip off." Character development takes place on two levels: the landscape of consciousness and the landscape of action.

In *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), rhetorician Kenneth Burke developed The Dramatist Pentad. This method invites us to analyse how we "talk about experience" (Burke, 1945, p. 317). As such, it does not deal with the experience itself but creates a vocabulary to communicate about it. A vocabulary equates with the minimal structure of a story, which consists of five basic constituents or Principles. These five key components answer the following questions: who (*Agent*), when and where (*Scene*), how and by what means (*Agency*), what (*Act*), and why (*Purpose*).

An *Agent* can be a character or "motivational properties" such as "drives," "instincts," "states of mind" and collective words for agent, such as nation, group" (Burke, 1945, p. 20). An *Act* is defined synonymously with plot, as "conscious or purposive motion" (p. 14) and as motivated by novelty. *Agency* covers means, instruments, tools, power, authority, and medium. *Purpose* deals with intention, goals, or "the Aristotelian 'happiness'" (p. 292), and *Scene* locates the action in time and place. Later in his analysis, Burke devised a sixth principle, *Attitude,* "which is not outright an *Act*, but an incipient or arrested *Act*, a *state of mind,* the property of an *agent"* (p. 460). A fully rounded vocabulary—a complete thought—places motives in all five principles of the Pentad.

Burkeian drama is generated by an imbalance in the ratio between the Principles—*Agent* does not fit *Scene,* for instance—or by ambiguity created by the possibility of locating motives in more than one

Principle: either within the *Agent* (intrinsic) or within the *Scene* (extrinsic), or within *Agency* or *Purpose*. Burke sees ambiguities as places where transformations take place.

How does it work? One "looks for key terms, one seeks to decide which terms are ancestral and which derivative; and one expects to find terms possessing ambiguities that will bridge the gulf between other terms or otherwise serve as developmental functions" (Burke, 1945, p. 402). Patterns of merger or homogeneity ("a part of"), on the one hand, and of division, heterogeneity, "apart from" (p. 406) and their bridging principle of continuity that "partakes somewhat of both" (p. 404), on the other, are important.

Research design

We set out to develop a basic repertoire clustering the recurring dichotomies around key terms. We then categorized these fields under the components of the minimal story structure. We used the imbalances and ambiguities to create a new layer of meaning.

Hartley offered the following minimal definition of a reading group: "a group of people who meet on a regular basis to discuss books" (Hartley 2003: 2). She situated it in a neighbourhood and home context (80% meet at somebody's home).

We pinpointed the following key terms within the chosen research reports: "reader," "home," "reading mode," "purpose," "discussion mode," "book," "book choice," and "book meeting." We proceeded to look for dichotomies such as male-female, academy-home, literary-personal, education-pleasure, book-focused versus personal narratives, classics versus reading group book, cultural-personal, solitary-group, and historical-contemporary. Next, we clustered all ideas that related to these pairs.

In the next phase we allocated these fields to the components of the minimal narrative structure. Our basic proposition equates home and historical time with *Scene*; readers and their communities with *Agents*; and books, book choice, and reading mode with *Agency*. The *Act* describes the different patterns through which readers, books, reading experiences, discussions, and life narratives are brought together. Finally, the *Purpose* deals with the discussion mode.

Table 1. The Principles of Reading Groups

Scene	*Agency*	*Act*	*Agent*	*Purpose*
· **Place** · **Time**	· **Book** · **Book choice** · **Reading mode**	**Book meeting**	**Readers**	· **Discussion mode**
· academy-home · historical-contemporary	· classics–reading group book	passive-active	male-female solitary-group	· book-focused versus personal narratives

·	cultural- personal			
·	literary- personal			

We then proceeded to look for imbalances between the Principles, which we considered as a new variation of the reading group experience. Each time we focused on which motives started the discussion, thus labelling the Ancestral Principle within the repertoire.

Finally we formulated for each of these discussions metaphors, as to '*define,* or *determine* a thing, is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual reference' (Burke 1945: 24).

Purpose

As 'each group is different and relishes that difference' (Hartley 2003: 23), a diversity caused by 'who is in them and what they read' (Hartley 2003: 23), we set out to develop a way of talking about these distinctions.

However, in this study we propose to define the dissimilarities among reading groups not on reader's identity and reading mode but on the Principle that is at the heart of the discussion. As a consequence, we foreground the different ways in which we talk about a reading group instead of the different kinds of reading groups.

Repertoires on Reading Groups

Repertoire matrix

We have developed a Repertoire Matrix that explains the nascence of the reading group over time. One can discern phases within this process following Turner's analysis of transformations. The Historical Repertoire depicts the canonical state within the reading community. The Social Repertoire portrays the breach within this picture. The Cultural Repertoire outlines the failed attempts to restore the initial state and the ensuing crisis. The new legitimate order is sketched within the Transformative and Narrative Repertoire. We have structured our findings following the narrative mode using the *forma* of the *Bildungsroman* and present this evolution as linear, although the constellation of the Repertoires does not belong to the scope of our research. We have found one clear indication that the Social Repertoire has to

precede the Transformative: trust is fundamental to allow for "tentative and exploratory openness —

toward new ideas, about one's feelings" (Long, 2003, p. 187). However, further research is needed on this

aspect. Throughout the analysis we will use the Repertoire Matrix both as a summary as well as a

description of the development of our analysis.

Table 2. Repertoire Matrix

	Scene	*Act*	*Agency*	*Agent*	*Purpose*
Basic	· **Place** · **Contemporary**	**Book meeting**	· **Book** · **Book Choice** · **Reading mode**	**Readers**	**Discussion mode**
Historical	**Scholarly – domestic**	Surveillance	erudite, analytic morally and intellectually 'interruptible', 'ephemeral and 'circumscribed by the ties of personal relationships'	Male, reader/writer Female, reader/ consumer	Intellectual moral elevation; production of High Culture 'Receptive' and self-induced'; pleasure; questionable culture
Social	Safe place	**Meet**	· bond · different books · empathise · discussibility · friend's recommendation	Solitary – reading group	Discuss
Cultural	Home versus Institute Literature	Negotiate	· **reading group book** · **contempora-ry novels** · **poaching** · **cultural authority** · **semantic reading** · **differences**	Ambiguity – certainty Reading group readers – cultural valuators	Define a new literary practice
Transformative	Reading group and outside world	Negotiating life choices	· orientalising fiction · immersion · coduction · compare	**Conservative versus innovative readers**	Articulate new possibilities

			· consensus		
			· playful		
Narrative	Inner versus outer world	Become the story	· life narrative	Readers versus narrators	**Write new narratives**
			· Life narratives		
			· Imagine		
			· Self-disclosure		

Historical Repertoire: *Scene*

This discourse starts from the dichotomies past-contemporary and "withdrawn from the world' (Long, 2003, p. 2)-'domestic' (Long, 2003, p. 4). It covers the debate starting from the differences between representations of readers and reading groups over time — from early Christian art up until the twenty-first century — and within place — the sacred "scholarly study" or the secular, "domestic," "private sphere of leisure" (Long, 2003, p. 4) As such, *Scene* functions as the Ancestral Principle in this repertoire.

This leads to disputes situated in the Principle *Agent*. It opposes the historical reader as "solitary" (Long, 2003, p. 2) to the contemporary reader as social. It also differentiates between the serious male reader/writer who "transcends the world" and the "sensuous, frilled, and frivolous" female reader "positioned in the mundane" (Long, 2003, p. 5). Female readers, also, are characterised on the one hand as "spinsters" who prefer reading to participating in "adult heterosexuality" and "family living" or, on the other, as avid readers who "neglect their family responsibilities and fritter away time" (Long, 2003, p. 13).

Another debate within this narrative is that between the visible white upper-class bourgeois reader and the other, invisible classes and races of readers (Long, 2003, p. 6).

Within the Principle *Agency,* the debate centres on limited versus proliferated reading; on reading versus sociability and participation in an active life (Long. 2003. p. 2); on "erudite, analytic, (…) morally and intellectually" (p. 3) versus "interruptible"; on "ephemeral" and "circumscribed by the ties of personal relationships" (p. 5); on tomes versus "notes," "letters," and "tiny books"; on "serious" versus "escapist" modes of reading, which is characterised as "less contemplative," "langourous, narcissistically absorbed in imaginative literature that helps them while away the hours" (p. 6). Reading letters mediates between the "interior life" and "the outer world" (Long, 2003, p. 5).

The *Act* can be seen as the opposition of the being-nothing pair, foregrounding the unified scholarly practice against the multitude of female reading modes. Thus it can be linked to the fabula of "obedience and authority" that women's reading, "both as activity and as content (fiction, stereotypically romance

fiction), threatens because it represents escape and holds forth at least the possibility of subverting the structures that discipline our lives" (Long, 2003, p. 13). As a consequence, women's reading needs "surveillance."

The disparity between reading for intellectual and moral elevation versus reading for "receptive" and "self-induced" pleasure, for "compensatory or predictable satisfactions" (Long 2003, p. 13) is allocated to the Principle *Purpose*. The contrast between "the production and dissemination of serious and high culture" provided by authoritative men and the "consumption and 'creation' of ephemeral or questionable culture" (Long, 2003, p. 7) associated with privileged women is situated here, as well: men read to write books, and women write letters.

Imbalances and ambiguities

The Historical Repertoire functions as the dominant discourse, as the contemporary narratives on reading groups defy its components. We use the imbalances *Scene-Act*, *Scene-Agency*, *Scene-Agent*, and *Scene-Purpose* to develop the various ways one can talk about a reading group.

Table 3. Imbalances and Ambiguities within the Historical Repertoire

Scene-Act	We read at home (*Scene*) but we meet (*Act*). Therefore, · we are not solitary (*Agent*); · we don't read for pleasure but to bond (*Agency*); · we don't read only; we also discuss (*Purpose*).
Scene-Agency	We read at home *(Scene)* but our reading mode is different *(Agency)*. Therefore, · we have to be able to deal with ambiguity (*Agent*); · we have to negotiate, to select, to conflict, to resist *(Act)*; · we have to define a new literary culture *(Purpose)*.
Scene-Agent	We read at home *(Scene)*, but we want to change *(Agent)*. Therefore, · we negotiate life choices and identities *(Act)*; · we play, leap, compare, relate to fiction and life narratives as other possible lives *(Agency)*; · we articulate new possibilities of being *(Purpose)*.
Scene-Purpose	We read at home *(Scene)*, but we narrate the self *(Purpose)*. Therefore, · we want to narrate *(Agent)*; · we imagine *(Agency)*; · we become the story *(Act)*.

The Social Repertoire is based on the imbalance between *Scene-Act.* We experienced some difficulties in allocating "to discuss" to a Principle. This ambiguity indicates a first level of transformation. Whereas the function of reading, namely intellectual and moral elevation versus passing time in a pleasurable way, coincided with the *Purpose* in the Historical Repertoire, this is no longer true for the reading group reader. The *Purpose* within the Social Repertoire is to discuss, and from the Cultural Repertoire onward "to discuss" has evolved into the Principle *Act.* Thus, "to discuss" functions as a developmental term as we move from wanting to discuss (Social Repertoire), to discussion respecting differences (Cultural Repertoire), to a playful mode of discussion reaching consensus (Transformative Repertoire), to the creation of narratives (Narrative Repertoire).

The Ancestral Principle in the Cultural vocabulary is *Agency,* as the debate focuses on different reading practices and their legitimacy. The *Scene-Agent* debate is reconstrued within the Transformative Repertoire: the *Agent* is not receptive but wants to change. And finally the question of whether the reading group reader wants to do more than write letters is addressed in the Narrative Repertoire initiated by *Purpose*.

Social Repertoire: *Act*

The Ancestral Principle within this vocabulary is *Act,* linking readers to books and their reading pleasures. As such, reading groups are vital for readers because most "readers need the support of talk with other readers, the participation in a social milieu in which books are 'in the air'" (Long, 2003, p. 10). So, reading group readers meet with books, other readers, and fictional characters.

The ensuing dichotomy is between the "solitary reader" and "the reader in context" (Hartley, 2003, p. 22; Long, 2003, p. 3; Barstow, 2003, p. 10; Burwell, 2007, p. 284). *Agents* are "friends, neighbours, or family" (Hartley, 2003, p. 41) who form a homogeneous group "in age, class, educational status and stage in life-cycle" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 574; Hartley, 2003; Long, 2003, p. 48; Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 81; Burwell, 2007, p. 285). Yet reading groups can also serve as a way of bringing women "out of the restricted circles of kin, neighbours, and those who shared political and religious sympathies and into egalitarian forms of contact with other women rather different from themselves" (Long, 2003, p. 48).

Women find or join a reading group because they "need to connect with others" and enjoy an atmosphere of "sharing and caring" (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69), and also because they want "to maintain their currency as literate citizens" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 583). Thus, they meet to have book discussions: the *Purpose* of this vocabulary. Book discussions have to leave room "to include each member's opinions and life situations" (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 84) because these "different views" keep the group going

(Barstow, 2003, p. 6). They can best be compared to a conversation between different reading experiences, as reading group readers do not read "from the same page" (Hartley, 2003, p. 151) and have "such richly differentiated previous experiences" (Long, 2003, p. 28). These differences are "the joy of the group" (Hartley, 2003, p. 80). The debate follows "the model of 'emotional literacy' which values teamwork, listening, and sharing over self-assertion and winning the argument" (Hartley, 2003, p. 137). It is not the ultimate goal to "reach consensus" (Hartley, 2003, p. 136), yet some control mechanisms, such as "silencing or stigmatizing members" and "joking and a lack of responsiveness" (Long, 2003, p. 187), may enforce conformity.

To facilitate this discussion, reading group readers need the ability to bond: *Agency*. Building a community of readers (Hartley, 2003, p. 138; Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69), making everybody "feel at home," creating "an atmosphere of 'trust,'" "social well-being" (Hartley, 2003, p. 16; Long, 2003, p. 187), and "group solidarity" (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69) are motives allocated to the principle of *Agency* within this vocabulary.

"The books themselves, the range of opinion in the group, the background of context or information which people bring to the book, the congenial atmosphere" enable a good discussion (Hartley, 2003, p. 74). The conversation focalizes on "the book that everyone has read" (Hartley, 2003, p. 19; Poole, 2003, p. 6). So this competence presupposes readers' willingness to read different books "than they would read on their own" and to respect various reading modes (Long, 2003, p. 187). These seem to amount to bonding with characters: empathy with the characters and with the other readers, and the author's empathy with the characters, are the key ingredients for engagement with a book (Hartley, 2003, p. 132; Poole, 2003, p. 5; Long, 2003, p. 152; Burwell, 2007, p. 286).

As a consequence, books are chosen for their "discussibility." A discussible book is defined as "a book people can take different opinions on and find evidence in the text to support" (Long, 2003, p. 118). That is why "bad" books can become popular, as they can lead to good discussions (Hartley, 2003, p. 74).

Books can also be chosen because of a friend's recommendation, which may or may not rely on literary reviews. This explains how some novels become "overwhelmingly popular" (Long, 2003, p. 122). We can conclude that literature within this vocabulary functions as a way to connect to the world and "as a conduit for conversation" (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69).

The *Scene,* finally, has to reflect this feeling of intimacy, because the "domestic location contributes significantly to the whole experience" (Hartley, 2003, p. 15). The dichotomy between local versus global, and a "smaller circle of known faces," "small scale," "direct contact" and "word of mouth" versus "the all-encompassing media" and "long-distance links" (Hartley, 2003, p. 14) shape this part of the discourse. The

reading group is presented as a "safe environment" where friendships are fostered (Hartley, 2003, p. 16; Poole, 2003, p. 6).

Cultural Repertoire: *Agency*

When people argue about proper interpretations or about using notes, or compare reading groups to university or educational practices, they are viewing the reading group through the lens of the Cultural Repertoire.

We start this vocabulary from the *Scene-Agency* imbalance, as this repertoire is dominated by the paradoxical conclusion that the reading mode is both and at the same time "erudite, analytic, (…) morally and intellectually" (Long, 2003, p. 3) and "interruptible," "ephemeral and "circumscribed by the ties of personal relationships' (p. 5). Indeed, there may be "references to college and graduate school papers about novels as well as by episodes of formal analysis during book discussions" (Long, 2003, p. 152), but the discussions deal predominantly with experiential reading. Both Hartley and Long refer to Certeau's concept of "poaching" as a reading mode: readers "snatch what they need from the grounds of legitimate culture" (Long, 2003, p. 30). Or as Hartley puts it, "their sort of reading is what French scholars call poaching; groups take over and appropriate their books to read in the ways that best suit them" (Hartley, 2003, p. 138; Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 573) or "for what they find interesting to discuss" (Long, 2003, p. 220). Reading is seen as acquiring what Edmund Burke calls "equipment for living" (cited in Long, 2003, p. xviii) rather than as a way of improving literary criticism (Long, 2003, p. 220). Reading groups prefer the semantic to the aesthetic reading (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 573), "reading for pleasure" to "schooled reading" (Long, 2003, p. 220). They value the different reading experiences of the individual reader over the accredited academic interpretation (Long, 2003, p. 221). Groups, Hartley (2003) argues, "often deplore what they see as their literary shortcomings." But, she adds, "they have a sad tendency for joint depreciation" (p. 101).

One of the complaints made about reading groups is that they have created the "reading group book, an undemanding and dreary genre of safe, middlebrow best-sellers created by and for reading groups. The figures from our survey just don't bear this out" (Hartley, 2003, p. 154) They don't read genre or formulaic books, either (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 575; Long, 2003, p. 119; Poole, 2003, p. 5). They develop their *Agency* through contemporary fiction and life-writing, books written by women and "generated within their own culture" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 572; Long, 2003, p. 120) instead of through avant-garde literature (Long, 2003, p. 59). Their book choice is less "classical" than their school or university reading (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 575). They hesitate over classics (Hartley, 2003, p. 78) but still read them, which is seen

as "a morally and intellectually enhancing experience" (Long, 2003, p. 119) or as "low-risk reading because they provide guaranteed cultural worth" (Long, 2003, p. 120).

Indeed, reading group readers accept the authority of cultural arbiters (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 578; Long, 2003, p. 121) for their book choice to "legitimate choices and to predict the outcome of their reading experience" (Long, 2003, p. 122). Literary reviews, booksellers, friends and other reading group members are used as mediators between the wider world and the reading group (Long, 2003, p. 123). They also accept an established hierarchy of taste (Long, 2003, p. 118): classics, contemporary serious fiction, good best-selling books, science fiction, westerns, and at the bottom of the hierarchy, romances (Long, 2003, p. 120). Finally, their reading choice is influenced by literary prizes and book reviews (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 578; Poole, 2003, p. 5). Yet the books are chosen for their "narrative" and "character-interest" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 567; Poole, 2003, p. 6) rather than for their "textuality," "experimentation," or "literary distinction" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 568).

Their book discussions, however, are neither dominated by "literary talk" nor by reading group notes devised by literary practitioners (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 575; Hartley, 2003, p. 101). Some readers want to discuss the book "as they had at university" and show a desire to learn (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69), but others "don't want it to feel like studying" (Hartley, 2003, p. 34). They read for pleasure (Hartley, 2003, p. 35; Long, 2003, p. 127). Their response is personal rather than literary: they use "their own life experiences as a basis for speculation on characters' motives in much the same way they might engage in gossip about real people" (Poole, 2003, p. 5).

The discrepancies within *Agency* are reflected by the ambiguities within the *Agents.* They are characterised by "flexibility," "openness to new ideas," "cross-cultural sensitivity," and being able to deal with "ambiguity" (Hartley, 2003, p. 13).

Reading group readers both belong to and distinguish themselves from the group of cultural valuators. Reading group readers are depicted as different from cultural authorities such as professors, reviewers, and booksellers (Long, 2003, p. 117). However, a majority work within book-related fields (Hartley, 2003, p. 35) and are well-educated (Hartley, 2003, p. 35; Poole, 2003, p. 2; Burwell, 2007, 285), "which makes contemporary women reading groups seem like an endeavour in continuing or lifelong education rather than a compensatory activity" (Long, 2003, p. 62). Yet they see being non-academic as "part of their self-definition" (Hartley, 2003, p. 138). Long speculated that reading groups may even cause a certain discomfort for academics, as they "inevitably bring into view both the commercial underside of literature and the scholar's position of authority in the world of reading" (Long, 2003, p. 11).

Reading group readers are defined as serious middlebrow, in contrast to academic readers on the one hand and the "wish-fulfilment" or "lazy reader" on the other. They are simultaneously "vilified for lowering

taste" and "celebrated as a sign of flourishing literacy" (Burwell, 2007, p. 282). They form "this constituency of informed freethinkers, committed to reading, yet standing at sceptical arm's length from the business of producing, selling and reviewing books is invaluable" (Hartley, 2003, p. 156). They don't want to be managed by the cultural "mainstream" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 571), but they are unaware of the processes that "price, print, and 'push' a title" (Long, 2003, p. 116) and that drive bookstore owners, book chains, and librarians. And as the "availability" of a book through local bookstores and the existence of a paperback edition are "preconditions for choice," reading group readers are steered by these market policies (Long, 2003, p. 116). Yet at the same time they have a "profound impact on the publishing industry" (Burwell, 2007, p. 281).

Cultural gatekeepers, in turn, don't seem to appreciate the cultural praxis of women readers and reading groups. They are described as having internalised the view that "they seek 'light and frivolous' materials" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 571). The reading group has been deprecated by cultural valuators as a place "where ladies can gossip while indulging their interest in literature" (Poole, 2003, p. 2), as "chat and chew" sessions (Sorenson, 1991, cited in Poole, 2003, p. 2), as "stitch and bitch sewing bees" (Alice, 1998, cited in Poole, 2003, p. 2), and as a "quaint, old-fashioned leisure activity" (Howie, 1998, cited in Poole, 2003, p. 2). Thus they were not worthy of "serious research" (Howie, 1998, cited in Poole, 2003, p. 2), have been under-researched (Long, 2003), but are increasingly being researched (Burwell, 2007, p. 282).

From that, the researchers describe the *Scene* as an important site "for the acquisition of cultural capital" (Poole, 2003, p. 1; Burwell, 2007, p. 286) "outside institutional frameworks," "neither securely within nor outside cultural authorities" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 571), and "at a healthy distance from the professional world of writing and reviewing" (Hartley, 2003, p. 156).

Thus the *Act* can be described as "a complex dance entailing negotiation, selection, and conflict, and very often silent resistance with cultural providers" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 573) renegotiating "the boundaries of legitimate culture" (Long, 2003, p. 128).

The *Purpose* of the reading group within the Cultural Repertoire is to "negotiate taste and texts for a variety of purposes other than the narrowly aesthetic, and in this their practice is more closely aligned with the broadening of the academy's curriculum than they realise" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 573). They have also redefined the term "literary," which refers to "things literary" such as "literary epitaphs" and the "literary meritocracy," such as the "pedigree and connections" of the writer (Long, 2003, p. 129). The *Purpose* is about acquiring the right to disseminate literary taste (Burwell, 2007, p. 286).

Reading groups don't adhere to the "Art for Art's Sake" formula that Burke saw as an *Agency-Purpose* identification (Burke, 1945, p. 289). They "challenge authoritative literary opinion" (Long, 2003, p. 156). Reading group readers see themselves "as advocates for a new map of literary culture and possibly as

claimants for a new kind of cultural authority based on open-mindedness, literary populism, and reading competence across generic boundaries" (Long, 2003, p. 128). Within this new paradigm the focus shifts from the difference between readers and "serious" readers to the dissimilarities between "reader and non-reader." This new literary judgment does not focus on high and low culture but rather on "worthwhile reading and trash reading." It favours "avidity" over the "purity of taste" and the "moral seriousness of the discussion" over "the formal qualities of a given genre or individual book" (Long, 2003, p. 128).

Transformative Repertoire: *Agent*

Do women actually change through reading within a reading group or do they remain their receptive, pleasure-seeking "sensuous, frilled, and frivolous," "mundane" selves (Long, 2003, p. 5)? The debate concerning this question is addressed within the Transformative Repertoire, which starts from the motives allocated to the principle of *Agent.*

Women juxtapose their social roles and their sense of self (Long, 2003, p. 157). They are often characterised by their need to move away from an existing situation either because their life differs from the life lived by their mothers (Long, 2003, p. 63) or because they want to escape the "monotony of work" (Hartley, 2003, p. 36; Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 69).

Confronted with otherness, we can subdivide the *Agent* into innovative and conservative readers. Innovative readers "try on new ideas," "share experiences," "enter the world enriched by the process" (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 85) and value the challenge of "reassessing" opinions (Hartley, 2003, p. 84). Conservative readers, however, "distance themselves," avoid confrontations with unpleasant issues, and "reflect shared expectations that exist prior to the act of reading" (Barstow, 2003, p. 12).

On a more global level, we can discern between First and Third World citizens, where First World women are depicted as "secular, liberated and having control over their own lives" and the Third World woman is depicted "as a singular, monolithic subject, without agency and complexity, and in need of rescue" (Burwell, 2007, p. 289).

"Immersion rather than analysis" (Long, 2003, p. 152) defines the *Agency* within the Transformative Repertoire, as the books have to become "real" for reading group readers to relate to them as other possible lives. Identification with a character facilitates this perception. Solitary readers also identify with characters, but within a reading group this identification becomes more powerful because the reader hears the reactions of her fellow members and their personal narratives. Thus, the "characters become a prism for the interrogation of self, other selves, and society beyond the text" (Long, 2003, p. 153). The reading mode is what Booth calls "coduction," emphasizing the comparative process by which readers

unavoidably perceive and judge any person or story against the backdrop of all other people and stories they have known (Long, 2003, p. 26)

We have already mentioned the importance of reading books other than personal book choices within the Social Repertoire as facilitating the bonding process. Within the Transformative Repertoire these books, being "more adventurous," "controversial" and "more demanding than their private reading" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 575), help readers connect to other possible lives.

Although reading groups read predominantly national literature written in their mother tongue, "orientalising" fiction, or fiction that seeks to understand other cultures as a primary focus (Devlin Glass, 2001, p. 578), belong to their reading fare. Recent reading groups even show a preference for the "consumption of texts by and about women living in the Third World" (Burwell, 2007, p. 282).

They also read differently, "citing more attention to the text and to their own reactions" (Long, 2003, p. 187). "As such these discussions can encourage (through difference and disputation) a clearer articulation of partially formulated perceptions and implicit assumptions, whether about a specific book or about personal experience. This process is particularly enlightening for participants (and perhaps most innovative) when groups can forge a new consensus" (Long, 2003, p. 187). When readers disagree about a book they might "become the champion of literary heritage" (Long, 2003, p. 177), but scholarship doesn't win a debate from experiential truths. Other persuasive strategies are "trying to make the author into a sympathetic character" (Long, 2003, p.178) or relating "how important the book or author has been" (Long, 2003, p. 179) in one's life.

The discussion consists of the individual's experience of the book, the experience of other reading group members, and "related accounts of other members' personal experiences" that allow the reading group reader to "inhabit other subjectivities" (Long, 2003, p. 152). The discussion can be perceived as "playful," leaping from "topic to topic" with "a stream-of-consciousness structure" (Long, 2003, p. 145). Same-different evaluations play a significant role within these debates: readers "enjoy finding something they can recognize or feel close to (…) but they also enjoy exploring what is strange or different, which they can learn from' (Long, 2003, p. 177).

Within this repertoire the following functions are allocated to literature: to "understand and empathize with different worlds' (Long, 2003, p. 152), to gain "recognition and insight," "to question their own values" (Long, 2003, p. 154), to broaden a sense of possibilities (Long, 2003, p. 181), and to engage with the "pleasures of deep emotional involvement, meaningfulness, or illumination of their experience" (Long, 2003, p. 130).

The *Scene* is characterised as semiprivate (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 571; Hartley, 2003, p. 120). This is "a social space that calls our received distinction between public and private into question" (Long, 2003, p. 120), where the home is intertwined with different contexts: the "contemporary historical moment" (Long, 2003, p. 22) and the discursive space of the "clash of civilizations" or of "global sisterhood" (Burwell, 2007, p. 289). The *Scene* is also defined as a place where the boundaries between cultural representations and "'real life' become blurred" (Long, 2003, p. 174).

The "as-if" plot can be described as the *Act* in this vocabulary, focusing on the reflection "on identities they already have but also to bring new aspects of subjectivity into being" (Long, 2003, p. 22; Burwell, 2007, p. 286). Thus, the *Act* shows the process of negotiating "life choices and identities" (Long, 2003, p. 68). This can be an innovative exercise, "creating new connections, new meanings, and new relationships — to the characters in books or their authors, to themselves, to the other members of the group, to the society and culture in which they live" (Long, 2003, p. 22). Alternatively, it can turn into a conservative response reinforcing stereotypes, "rewriting both the writer and her text according to scripted first-world narratives" (Amireh, 2000, p. 215, cited in Burwell, 2007, p. 289). The conservative response refuses "to imagine other ways of living" (Long, 2003, p. 182) or reduces "heterogeneous histories" "to the myth of an unchanging monolith," or perceives single texts "as representing 'the truth' about large and diverse populations" (Burwell, 2007, p. 288). Innovative acts lead to remaking reading group identities (Long, 2003, p. 22), whereas conservative acts end up "appropriating" and "assimilating" (Burwell, 2007, p. 286) the narrative to gratify the reading group's needs.

The *Purpose* within this vocabulary is to explore other subjectivities. This can be realised as having made "new friends" and becoming "more reflective," "more tolerant of others," and "more confident" in groups (Long, 2003, p. 111). "Reading group discussions perform creative cultural work, for they enable participants to articulate or even discover who they are: their values, their aspirations, and their stance toward the dilemmas of their worlds" (Long, 2003, p. 145) that "structure the narratives we read and the lives we lead" (Long, 2003, p. 61). Thus, the *Purpose* of readers within the Transformative Repertoire is to "discover their desires and articulate new possibilities for being" (Long, 2003, p. 157).

Narrative Repertoire: *Purpose*

The Narrative Repertoire defies the perception of the female reader who prefers the "consumption and 'creation' of ephemeral or questionable culture" (Long, 2003, p. 7) and who sticks to writing letters. How do women use books as a language to "narrate their own experience" (Long, 2003, p. xviii)? Long defines this as a "kind of imaginative experience" (Long, 2003, p. 145). She quotes De Beauvoir and Atwood to indicate this to be a logical step, moving from the "object" of someone else's life to subject of one's own.

However, she only mentions one reader-writer who was "developing a part-time career as a writer after her children had left home" (Long, 2003, p. 81). Hartley also found but one group that "has made the leap from reading to writing" (Hartley, 2003, p. 113).

The *Agency* enabling this step consists of intermingling both the personal and the fictional narratives; a "creative" but not a "reactive reflection" leading to "cultural invention" (Long, 2003, p. 60). Self-disclosure plays an important role in this repertoire (Poole, 2003, p. 7). Reading groups seem to motivate self-disclosure as "less risky or less consequential than it would be among peers one sees every day" (Long, 2003, p. 211).

We include in this repertoire discussion about the popularity of the biography/autobiography/memoir category. Why are "life narratives" so popular (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 580)? They are criticized because they are "tedious," contain "too much name-dropping," "recorded speech," or are "too long" (Hartley, 2003, pp. 57-58). However, they are called popular because life narrative is a genre preferred by women (Rehberg Sedo, 2003, p. 79; Poole, 2003, p. 2). This assertion, however, is contradicted by Hartley's and Long's findings that men seem to prefer biographies slightly more than do women (Hartley, 2003, p. 59; Long, 2003, p. 113). Long, however, suggests an unconscious link between the internal conflicts in both the subject of the life narrative and the reader herself (Long, 2003, p. 134). Finally, we have to mention that another reason life narratives are popular is because publishers "sell the memoir to book club readers" (Burwell, 2007, p. 290).

As a consequence, the *Agents* are subdivided between readers and narrators and also between men and women. Men are supposed to pose a threat to self-disclosure (Poole, 2003, p. 4). Men are still characterized as writers and reading groups are still depicted as opposed to writers, who are met at "meet-the-writer fora" (Devlin-Glass, 2001, p. 580), "author events" (Hartley, 2003, p. 9), "the marketing practice of having writers meet readers both on-line and at over-subscribed Writers' Festivals" (Poole, 2003, p. 1), "book-and author luncheons" (Long, 2003, p. 76), and 'author appearances" (Burwell, 2007, p. 281). Reading group members hardly ever become writers, but writers can participate in the "readers' conversation," becoming "one of the discussion group" (Hartley, 2003, p. 5).

The *Act* can be described as a group of people carrying formed and unformed stories helping each other formulate new stories through fictional and personal stories; to "become the story" (Hartley, 2003, p. 114) or to create a "narration of the self" (Burwell, 2007, p. 286). According to Long, reading groups "have given women different ways to 'narrate the self,'" which she defines as being able "to understand their lives or vicariously to live through other choices, other ways of being in the word" (Long, 2003, p. 60). However, Hartley suspects this to be an area "where British and US groups diverge most" (Hartley, 2003, p. 114), as her findings don't support this.

The *Scene* can be situated on the border between the inner lives and the level of action within the reading group room, "a space for women to think about how their inner lives and external careers" differ (Long, 2003, p. 61).

Conclusion

We have limited our analysis to contemporary reading groups that meet within physical environments and during their leisure time. The aim of this study was to construct different ways to talk about the reading group experience. Researchers focus on "reader," "home," "reading mode," "purpose," "discussion mode," "book," "book choice," and "book meeting" to characterise the reading group experience. They problematized these through dichotomies such as male-female, academy-home, literary-personal, education-pleasure, book-focused versus personal narratives, classics-reading group book, cultural-personal, solitary-group, and historical-contemporary. We have sought to understand these contrasts by looking for Repertoires researchers used to talk about reading groups. As such we have detected the Historical, Social, Cultural, Transformational and Narrative Repertoire.

We started with the Historical Repertoire, with *Scene* as its Ancestral Principle. The historical reader reads alone either in his scholarly study or in her home. Historical readers read either for intellectual and moral improvement or for pleasure to pass time. Their reading mode is analytical or ephemeral. Their books are either "tomes" or letters. They are scholars or bourgeois white women.

From this Historical Repertoire we have defined four repertoires on contemporary reading groups. When we see the reading group as an act to bring people together, we use the Social Repertoire, foregrounding *Act*. From this the *Agents* are depicted as lonely and sociable readers who use books to bond and start up conversations within a safe environment.

When we portray the reading group as a way to discuss literature in an alternative mode, we use the Cultural Repertoire, starting from *Agency.* This repertoire commutes between accepting the literary practice and redefining it. Readers are mostly highly educated, work within the literary field, and rely on cultural valuators for their book choices but don't want to be perceived as intellectuals. Their reading mode is a mixture between literary analysis and experiential feedback, poaching books to serve their needs. The literary aesthetic they want to disseminate prefers avidity to pure taste, worthwhile reading to trash, readers to non-readers, and quality discussions to canonical books.

When we question the effect of the reading group on its members, we position ourselves within the Transformative Repertoire, initiated by *Agent.* We distinguish between conservative or progressive readers who achieve a consensus within their book discussion. Books help readers see the world through

other eyes, the eyes of the character, who obtains the status of a real person. The borders between the real and fictional world are blurred. Readers seek to redefine their identities.

Finally, when we wonder why reading groups do not lead to the development of new narratives, we argue from the Narrative Repertoire, with *Purpose* as its Ancestral Principle. Do reading group readers endeavour to write more than letters? Are there readers and writers in the reading group? How do they use books to tell their own stories?

We have combined these vocabularies into a Repertoire Matrix that allows people to frame their view on the contemporary reading group. We argued that these four repertoires counter narrative components within the Historical Repertoire. As such, the reading group developed along the pattern of division from the academic and private world, with the Cultural Repertoire functioning as a bridging vocabulary because it partakes somewhat of both the academic and the reading group discourses.

Interpretive repertoires allow researchers to establish a metavision by asking whose concerns are served by which dominant repertoire. To answer this question, we feel we have to study the reading group in other contexts and see whether the selection of repertoires varies.

Women's reading was confined within their social role in the Historical Repertoire. They grow through bonding (Social Repertoire) to avid readers (Cultural Repertoire) to redefinition of possible lives (Transformative Repertoire). But how they are affected by their reading group experiences to obtain rights which are not prescribed by their social roles needs further research.

We have limited our study to research reports that study reading groups outside the educational context, as the feelings toward this literary institute proved to be ambiguous. However, we think it is important to study reading groups through this lens as well.

Finally, "there are of course low points, disasters, splits, and spats" (Hartley, 2003, p. 95), but how do they happen? What effects do they have on the reading group? Again, this is a topic for further research.

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