

LEISURE READING: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AMOUNT OF WOMEN'S LEISURE READING AND THE VALUE THEY AND THEIR 'SIGNIFICANT OTHERS' PLACE ON THAT READING.

Christine Hardy, Nottingham Trent University

Studies on reading to date, have focused mainly on the acquisition of reading; reading ability; interpretation of text; uses of literacy and amount of reading undertaken. These studies have been carried out on the general population often using quantitative techniques, but some interesting results have emerged for women as a subset of that population. When ethnographic studies into reading have been conducted with women it is usually with women readers, for example those in reading groups or those in education; and the focus is often on a particular genre, mainly romance. There is very little research on the role that all leisure reading has for women in their daily lives, how they value that reading the attitudes of 'significant others'.

This current paper describes the reading habits and motivations of fourteen women in one family across four generations, with an age range of 94 to 18. It reports on how reading fits into their leisure time activities, the value they attach to that reading and how significant others influence their reading.

READING HABITS OF THE POPULATION

Reading is still a popular past time in the United Kingdom. According to the ONS 2002, approximately 97% of the population undertook personal reading in the seven days prior to the survey. Of the remaining 3% of the population, 1% indicated that they could not read and 2% chose not to read. An individual will spend on average 28 minutes a day reading, or approximately 3 and a half hours a week. When only those who report that they are regular readers are considered, this figure increases to six hours a week.

Newspapers are still the most popular choice of reading materials, with between 84 and 94% of the population reading them regularly, followed by books with between 59 and 74% of the population reading them, with magazines being the least popular with between 61 and 64% of the population reading them. In terms of time; books have the most reading time devoted to them with two and a half to five and a half hours per week spent reading them. Fiction and non-fiction together accounting to over two hours, increasing for those that read these genres to three and a half hours. Approximately two and a half hours is devoted to reading newspapers and three quarters of an hour to just over an hour reading magazines.

When reading is examined in terms of sex, more women read than men, but men and women read different materials. More men than women read newspapers and more women than men read books and magazines. For books the differences are marked, particularly for fiction and non-fiction. The BML/Orange survey found that men spend more time than women reading but that this was accounted for by reading of newspapers. Women are more avid book readers, particularly of fiction with over a quarter of women's reading being devoted to fiction, compared to one sixth for men. (BML/Orange 2002)

The amount of time spent reading generally was affected by whom the person was with, when people were alone or with another adult household member then the amount of time spent reading was more than if they were with a child or other people (Time Use Survey 2000). The time spent reading fiction increased if the individual was with a partner who also read fiction (BML /Orange 2002). Age has the largest impact on the amount of time devoted to reading, the retired spending between six and three quarters and nine and a half hours reading. Time is also another factor with those not in work spending more time reading than those in work (Time use survey 2000; BML/Orange 2002; Reading the situation 2000); people also indicated that they would read more if they had more time.

So with so much time currently devoted to reading by the population of the UK, and people indicating that they would read more if they had the time, it must be valued by a lot of the population. When asked about reading books in particular, the most common reason for

reading was to get information or because the subject matter was interesting, followed by a way to relax or relieve stress or for escapism (Reading the situation 2000; ONS survey 2002). These studies are quantitative in nature and ask respondents about their reading during a particular time scale, eg the previous seven days, but it does not adequately describe reading habits and behaviour.

Now I want to turn to describing the women in my sample and their reading habits and motivations.

READING IN THE SAMPLE.

For two female respondents **reading is their leisure activity** whilst in the house, and all other activities were secondary; both are retired and live alone. Their average time spent reading is approximately 5 to 6 hours a day, but that increases substantially when they go through a 'reading phase', which could last for a few days or a week. Then they will read all day and into the night. Their main reading material is books, although one does regularly read *Womans Realm* and the other *The Telegraph* on a Saturday. They read sitting in the lounge or in bed, but reading is their primary activity. They do not have another activity whilst reading, e.g. watching television, listening to the radio and will read in preference to undertaking housework. One of them reported that she typically reads ten books in a week. For them this is a continuance of previous reading habits, both have always been avid book readers, although whilst they were in employment and bringing up children their reading decreased due to a lack of time.

There are seven in the sample who are '**regular**' readers, who read every day. The age range was 68 to 25 at time of interview. The amount of time spent reading varies between approximately 4 hours a week and 15 hours a week. All these respondents consider themselves to have active lives, some with very little leisure time. They have a regular reading habit; such as always reading before going to bed, whilst in bed before going to sleep or travelling to and from work. They will also read when they find themselves with some spare time, for example in their breaks at work, whilst the children are playing out. They will also read 'in-between other activities' and whilst watching television

All these respondents read books and most of them also read periodicals, although one preferred magazines to books, and one regularly reads the local paper but only occasionally books. Five of this group will also sit and read continuously to the exclusion of everything else if they have the 'right book' or the opportunity. For four of them they will read only books to the exclusion of everything else, one prefers magazines.

Holidays present a good opportunity for people to increase their reading substantially, and those who read books take this opportunity.

For others, it is the book that determines their reading behaviour, and on these occasions they will read continuously and, on occasion, despite resistance from those they are with.

Two in the sample go through '**phases of reading**', where they read for a period of time and then do not read at all for a period of time. For one of them she will read a book regularly (between half an hour and an hour a day) until she has finished it and then not read another for three months or more, she also does not regularly read any other materials. The other will read many books over a period of a few weeks, often reading for many hours a day, and then not read anything for a week to a month or more. She also reads periodicals.

Both, if reading, will read in their spare time at work or travelling to work, or if they have 'nothing better to do'. For one, who reads continuously, she compares her behaviour to others, namely her mother and friend. Here there is a recognition that this may not be appropriate behaviour but justifies it with reference to these other people, ie 'she is just as bad'.

With the exception of two respondents who regularly read books and magazines, the remaining respondents tend to prefer books to magazines. Those that prefer books will very

seldom, if ever, purchase a magazine. They will 'flick through' one whilst waiting for an appointment or they do not have a book with them and magazines are available or they are given them. They feel that books are better value than magazines as they are continuous and you can 'get into them' whereas that is difficult with a magazine.

Without exception, those that read books, said that they read for relaxation, pleasure, escapism and time for themselves.

To me reading is purely pleasure, nothing else, I enjoy reading... I read for pleasure. Purely and simply for pleasure, I enjoy reading and the type of stories I read. Reading is pure pleasure and I do not understand anyone who does not enjoy reading (Respondent aged 71)

The pleasure of reading is the main emotion from books ... I use reading as entertainment and relaxation ... I just want to escape (Respondent aged 45)

... to escape I suppose in some ways, I read to escape things, so if I just you know, I don't know. I just have a reading mood or not reading mood. I do enjoy reading, and at times it makes you forget about work or family problems or ... it makes you forget. (Respondent aged 24)

Not able to remove themselves physically from their own situations, they can remove themselves psychologically by entering a different world. In addition some will re-read books that they know will promote a feeling of well being and 'cheer them up' if they are upset and can get not get consolation in any other way.

I will read if I am upset. I will go and select the book I know will make me feel better and read it [from cover to cover in one sitting]. If I am upset and I feel like crying sometimes, you know how you get, I can go and get a book off my shelves and sit and read it and I feel all right by the end of the book. (Respondent aged 63)

Of those that read books, the majority of them read only fiction. Only two of the sample read only romance books, the others reading a variety of genres, but tending to stick to one that they felt comfortable with. As they were using reading for relaxation and as an escape mechanism they did not want to be challenged by the books they read. They like books that are well written, have good characterisation and a good storyline, a book that they could identify with. For many the book would leave no lasting impression, they would forget the story on finishing it.

Two in the sample are **periodical readers**, although they may have started an occasional book, it is very unusual for them to finish one. They regularly read magazines or newspapers of their choice but not on a daily basis. One respondent reads in the lounge "sitting in an arm chair watching television and playing cards at the same time". Reading for her is not the primary activity. When considering books they report that they do not have the concentration or time to concentrate on reading a book.

They read periodicals that are of interest to them and are related to their hobbies. Their main motivation for reading is to get information.

The final respondent **never reads anything**, she is also the oldest at 94 years old at the time of the interviews. She reports that she has never read, she does not like reading, but does not know why.

Having described the samples reading habits I now want to turn my attention to the relationship between those habits and the attitudes of significant others, namely husbands and partners.

ATTITUDES OF 'SIGNIFICANT OTHERS' TO READING BEHAVIOUR

Seven in the sample are currently living with husbands or partners, two with children under the age of eighteen. Of these seven, five are regular readers, and four will read to the exclusion of everything else on occasion.

With the exception of one, all the partners do not read books but most read or did read periodicals.

For two of those living with partners, the partners take little or no interest in their reading. They may comment on the reading but do not actively discourage them, and will buy them books as presents so although taking no active interest they know what types of books the women read. The women do not change their reading behaviour due to their partner's attitudes to their reading and do not report feelings of guilt at reading. This is summed up by a widow, now a heavy reader, who was an avid book reader whilst her husband was alive although he did not read books:

[my husband] used to buy me books for my birthdays and Christmas. He bought me a Catherine Cookson book after I heard it read on the radio. He used to comment on my 'always having my nose buried in a book' but did not discourage me from reading in any way. (Respondent aged 74)

For the other five in the sub sample, partners attitudes and behaviours did affect the women's reading wither directly or indirectly. Some of the men show a total resistance to their partners reading, and when this occurs the women will change their reading behaviour, for example periodicals may be preferred to books as they can be read in short bursts and put down.

I just take my magazines with the stories in as [my husband] doesn't like me reading that much. ... I read them as they a light and easy and if you are busy it doesn't take you long to read one. But like the other day, I bought *Take a Break* and read it from cover to cover and did all the crosswords before putting it down. [my husband] said 'what have you been doing today' I said 'not a lot' (Respondent aged 68)

If these women have periods of reading to the exclusion of everything else then they hide it from their partner or will not start a book at all. Some women consider that their husbands stop them from reading as much as they would like, due to them being cut off from their husband whilst reading. This can cause antagonism between them.

Well I do [read books] but [my husband] gets in the way a bit, because I am obsessive. I pick up a book and can't even make dinner because I just want to get to the next chapter...I can't even answer anyone. ...I take a book with me and read it until I have finished it. ... This is what gets [my husband] OK, I read a book I take it everywhere. So we are going to Whitebrook, which is 30 miles away and I am reading a book on the way and he is trying to talk to me and I am going 'shut up, I don't want to talk to you, I want to finish before I get down there'. He is like; he says 'put that book away'. (Respondent aged 34)

For others, they will read either when their partner is engaged in an activity they are not interested in, or whilst the partner is out of the house.

... And then at night it is mostly, if [my husband] is watching something like a car show that I am not interested in, then I can read for half an hour then. ... I can read between, in the adverts, I can read ... if I am not really interested in the telly, but I can read and watch. My husband says I am the only one who can read and watch telly. I say 'no, come to work, ask out there, there are a lot of us about'. (Respondent aged 59)

... I don't read much at all, I mainly watch the television. I shouldn't really...I have read at home a few times, but not very often. The odd time when [my partner] is working, I finish tidying up and then pick my book up and read it. (Respondent aged 25)

For other women they feel guilty about the reading they undertake, particularly during the day. The following is from a woman who does not read books, only periodicals, and those related to her hobbies that she shares with her husband

If I read in the day then I felt guilty, I should be doing some work...I just feel really guilty if I have work to do and I am reading. If I sit down with my magazine for half and hour then I think I should not be doing this I should be doing something else. ...Nobody will interrogate [me] about the novel, but they will interrogate [me] on whether their shirt is ironed. (Respondent aged 44)

For some, having a husband or partner who reads will encourage the woman to read and their reading will increase as a consequence.

... And [my husband] used to read, he used to read in bed. He did a lot of reading. ...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. ... Oh yes, being with another reader, ... So I encourage him to read, because he doesn't read I will say to him 'why don't you read your book' then I will get mine out you see and we will both read. (Respondent aged 55)

The greatest effect on reading habits occurs with newspapers. Very few of the respondents purchase a newspaper for themselves, but will read or skim a paper that their partner has purchased, focusing on different areas. The following sums up the newspaper reading of the women in the sample:

We always had [the local paper delivered] as [my husband] reads newspapers, as that is what men do, basically isn't it? ... I glance through it occasionally, like he showed me an article last night and I did sit and read it. I would not say I was not interested in reading it, it just does not fascinate me, it doesn't interest me. If there is an article, then I will sit and read the article... He only reads newspapers, he wouldn't sit and read a book, he likes his newspapers (Respondent aged 59)

So to conclude, the women in this sample reflected what has been found in national surveys and ethnographic studies. The majority read for pleasure in their leisure time, with books being their preferred materials whereas the majority of their partners read newspapers but not books. When their partners did read books then they encouraged the women's reading of books and the time spent reading them rose. This was also reported in the BML/Orange survey, the reading of one partner positively influencing the reading of the other.

Reading is a private activity that takes the woman's attention away from their family and partner and in Radway's sample the women believed that their husbands objected to this. The women, in response felt guilt in three areas: the time spent reading, the money spent and also that they were not working in and around the home. They did not change their reading behaviour in response to the guilt or husbands resistance but persisted with romance reading often hiding the evidence. The women in Radways sample were not working and in contrast all the women in this sample, unless retired, worked most of them full-time. This left very little time for the women to read, but the majority still read on a daily basis, most above the national average in terms of time. Their partners either did not object to the reading undertaken by the women or they showed continuing resistance.

For those women whose partners showed resistance to their reading they responded by altering their behaviour or their choice of reading materials. They:

- stopped reading books
- read when the partner was not around and did not disclose that behaviour
- read when their partner was otherwise occupied and so did not demand the woman's attention.
- Read periodicals where they could read them in short periods of time with little sustained concentration.

With women working, in addition to having a decreased amount of time for leisure activities, they also have a decreased amount of time when they are alone, in the house without any other family member. So if they do read and their partner is resistant to that reading, they have no choice but to find coping mechanisms as outlined above. For the women in the Radway study this was not such a problem as they did not work and so had time in the home to themselves, where they could read.

Some women reported feelings of guilt at reading, particularly during the day when they should be 'doing something'. This is one of the areas where Radway's women felt guilt and still reflects what Radway describes as the 'result of their socialisation within a culture that continues to value work above leisure and play, both of which still seem to carry connotations of frivolousness ...' (p105). These feelings of guilt proved very powerful as a regulator of reading behaviour. Women would either stop reading for pleasure or read materials that were more informative, educational and useful.

Jarvis (2003) reports on three partnerships between men and women regarding reading and studying:

First, some men showed an almost total resistance to women's reading.

Second, other men were more relaxed about women's reading and were prepared to learn from their partners and read and discuss some books themselves, as long as this did not disturb the social, domestic and intellectual balance of their lives.

Third, some men presented themselves as teachers, intellectuals who judged the quality of the books women like to read, tried to introduce them to literature they considered more worthy, and made decisions about their capacity to cope with demanding reading.

In this sample, none of the men actively took an interest in the books that the women were reading. It was in the area of newspaper reading that men had the most influence on both the titles read, and the articles in any one edition. Women read the newspapers that the men brought into the home, and this was often a shared activity but led by the men.