

Becoming a Vampire Without Being Bitten. A New Study Shows That Reading Expands Our Self-Concepts.

April 22, 2011

“We read to know we are not alone,” wrote C.S. Lewis. But how do books make us feel we are not alone?

“Obviously, you can’t hold a book’s hand, and a book isn’t going to dry your tears when you’re sad,” says University at Buffalo, SUNY psychologist Shira Gabriel. Yet we feel human connection, without real relationships, through reading. “Something else important must be happening.”

In an upcoming study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Gabriel and graduate student Ariana Young show what that something is: When we read, we psychologically become part of the community described in the narrative—be they wizards or vampires. That mechanism satisfies the deeply human, evolutionarily crucial, need for belonging.

The researchers recruited 140 undergraduates for the study. First the participants were assessed on the extent to which they meet their needs for connection by identifying with groups. Then some read a passage from the novel *Twilight* in which the undead Edward describes what it feels like to be a vampire to his romantic interest Bella. Others read a passage from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in which the Hogwarts students are separated into “houses” and Harry meets potions professor Severus Snape. Participants were given 30 minutes to read the passage and were instructed to simply read for their own pleasure.

Then, two measures gauged the participants’ psychological affiliation with vampires or wizards. In the first, the students were instructed to categorize—as quickly and accurately as possible—“me” words (myself, mine) and “wizard” words (broomstick, spell, wand, potions) by pressing the same key when any of those words flashed on the screen; they pressed another key for “not-me” words (they, theirs) and “vampire” words (blood, fangs, bitten, undead). Then the pairs were reversed. Gabriel and Young expected participants to respond more quickly when “me” words were linked with a group to which “me” belonged, depending on which book they read.

Next the researchers administered what they called the *Twilight/Harry Potter Narrative Collective Assimilation Scale*, consisting of questions indicating identification with wizards or vampires. Examples: “Do you think you might be able to make yourself disappear and reappear somewhere else?” and “How sharp are your teeth?” Finally, short questionnaires assessed participants’ life satisfaction and mood.

As predicted, on both measures, *Harry Potter* readers “became” wizards and the *Twilight* readers “became” vampires. In addition, participants who were more group-oriented in life showed the largest assimilation effects. Finally, “belonging” to these fictional communities delivered the same mood and life satisfaction people get from affiliation with real-life groups.

“The study explains how this everyday phenomenon—reading—works not just for escape or education, but as something that fulfills a deep psychological need,” says Young. And we don’t have to slay any boggarts or get bitten to feel it.