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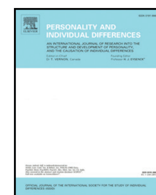

# Measuring the unimaginable: Imaginative resistance to fiction and related constructs

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ABSTRACT

*Imaginative resistance* refers to a perceived inability or unwillingness to enter into fictional worlds that portray deviant moralities (Gendler, 2000): we can all easily imagine that dragons exist, but many people feel incapable of imagining fictional worlds in which morality works differently. Although this phenomenon has received much attention from philosophers, no one has attempted to operationalize the construct in a self-report scale. In Study 1, we developed the Imaginative Resistance Scale (IRS), investigated its relationship to theoretically related constructs, and confirmed its structure and reliability ($r_\alpha = 0.92$) in a large sample. In Study 2, we asked participants to rate scenarios expected to provoke imaginative resistance and predicted these ratings from the IRS and its validity measures. IRS scores accounted for variability in ease of imagining these scenarios over and above gender, political orientation, and three related measures. The results are discussed in terms of theories of imaginative resistance and directions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

For the most part, readers are not only willing to accept the outlandish, impossible, and bizarre, but they are eager and easily able to do so. We can effortlessly imagine the world of *Harry Potter*, in which wizards play Quidditch and a villain rips his soul apart in order to hide it in seven artifacts. But what if Voldemort had won, and J.K. Rowling had asked us to believe that the genocide of all non-magical people was the morally correct thing to do in order to preserve the magical world? Most people have little trouble imagining atrocities happening in fiction (after all, they happen in real life), but we tend to recoil at the idea that such atrocities could be *the right thing to do*, even within a fictional universe. In other words, there seems to be a morality check for stories that portray normative paradigms that disagree with our own. Gendler (2000) referred to this reluctance to buy into morally repugnant fictional worlds as "imaginative resistance."

Philosophers have debated the nature and cause of imaginative resistance without coming to any concrete conclusion (cf. Brock, 2012; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Gendler, 2000, 2006; Levy, 2005; Walton, 2006; Weatherson, 2004; Yablo, 2009). Most examples refer broadly to morality: people are assumed to experience imaginative resistance to stories that normalize or advocate a moral paradigm (accepted rules of conduct) that conflicts with that of the reader. Some cases do not involve morality, such as humor (we cannot be *told* to laugh at something; Walton, 1994) and aesthetics (we cannot be *told* something is beautiful; Levy, 2005; Murray, 2001), but most accounts of it focus on examples of our reluctance to enter into imaginary worlds that appear to condone moral violations. Philosophical explanations for imaginative resistance are divided on whether it is a case of being *unable* or *unwilling* to imagine morally repugnant worlds (Gendler, 2006). For example, Weinberg and Meskin (2006) propose a cognitive model according to which we have an "imagination box" that is subject to censoring by our moral judgment system; we *cannot* imagine certain moral violations, because our real life morality automatically overrides any effort to keep a deviant moral claim in the imagination box. On the other hand, it may be that readers experience imaginative resistance because they do not *want* to imagine certain things (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002), perhaps because doing so would feel like desiring that morality.

Along these lines, various scholars have explained imaginative resistance as a result of author failure, due to breakdown of authority or lack of skill (Gendler, 2006; Matravers, 2003; Stueber, 2011). As sole creator of a fictional world, the author should be the ultimate authority for that world; however, imaginative resistance may emerge when readers begin to mistrust the author. Stueber (2011) argued that this kind of mistrust happens when the author does not provide context sufficient to warrant the suspension of our moral disbelief. Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada (2014) found that adding context to a morally perverse story reduced participants' subjective experience of imaginative resistance. One reason that we may be particularly sensitive to efforts by the author to dictate alternate moralities involves the fear of generalizing fictional immorality to the real world (Gendler, 2000, 2006). Because normative claims tend to be categorical in nature, and thus

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applicable to all possible worlds, it could appear to readers that the author is asking us to generalize (Murray, 2001). Todd (2009) argues that what others call "imaginative resistance" is simply part of the complex interactions between reader and writer, and perceived resistance is simply the result of readers' unwillingness to entertain certain fictions.

Little has been done to test empirically whether people actually experience the phenomenon of imaginative resistance as described by the philosophers. Do people really resist engagement with certain fictional worlds? Within psychology, this question has primarily been addressed through tangential research on transportation into narratives and its subsequent effect on persuasion (e.g., Appel & Mara, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000; Green, 2004). People who report being transported into stories are more likely to report attitudes in alignment with those expressed in the narrative (e.g., Appel & Richter, 2010). Green and Brock (2000) found that highly transported readers were less likely to notice the type of inconsistencies proposed to cause imaginative resistance, and Liao and Gendler (2011) (see also Liao et al., 2014) suggest that transportation is in effect the opposite of imaginative resistance.

Relatively few studies have addressed imaginative resistance more directly. Liao et al. (2014) investigated participants' reactions to morally deviant claims within fictional worlds; they found evidence that imaginative resistance indeed exists, but they also found that it depended on context and individual differences in familiarity with the genre of the fictional world. Barnes and Black (2016) used examples from the philosophical literature to investigate whether people found morally deviant fictional worlds truly impossible to imagine, or merely improbable. Participants reported finding morally deviant worlds easier to imagine than conceptually contradictory ones, but more difficult to imagine than worlds that were factually unlikely. Notably, there were individual differences in the ease with which participants could imagine each of the three types of scenarios, and participants who found morally deviant worlds maximally difficult to imagine explicitly labeled them as impossible, rather than merely improbable.

Thus, previous research has shown that imaginative resistance varies as a function of both the text with which participants are presented and individual differences amongst participants. However, little is known about the factors that underlie these individual differences. Barnes and Black (2016) suggested that some people may be unwilling to imagine a morally deviant world—or to empathize with an immoral character—because they explicitly or implicitly fear that doing so might affect their own moral beliefs and judgment. In other words, individuals who experience large degrees of imaginative resistance may fear that they could "catch" the deviant morality of a story by going along with it, even in a fictional context. Just as some individuals recoil in disgust at the idea of trying on Hitler's sweater (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994), some readers may find the idea of trying on alternate moralities disgusting or may worry about the possibility of becoming morally contaminated. There is little risk that a person who imagines a world in which gravity does not exist will cease to believe in gravity in the real world; however, people can and do change their moral beliefs, and the idea that one's real-world beliefs might be affect by the stories we imaginatively engage with is not unfounded.

Appel (2008) reported a positive correlation between fiction exposure and just world beliefs, and Appel and Mara (2013) found that when readers perceived characters as trustworthy, they were more likely to express intentions to change their real world behavior in alignment with the characters' ethical point of view. Readers tend to see the fictional universe through the eyes of fictional characters (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). Imaginative resistance may protect against this kind of empathic simulation, prevent transportation, and thereby render narratives less persuasive (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, 2004). The desire to avoid "trying on" alternate moralities may therefore vary not only based on trait empathy and transportability, but also based on the strength of real-world moral emotions related to fear of contagion, such as purity and disgust sensitivity, as well as on the centrality of morality to one's self-concept.

The purpose of the current research was twofold: first, to develop a measure of imaginative resistance, and second, to explore the relationship between self-reported resistance to engaging with morally deviant fictions and a variety of other factors. In line with past research (e.g., Barnes & Black, 2016; Liao et al., 2014), we expected to find individual differences in imaginative resistance, as well as the ease with which participants could imagine morally deviant scenarios. Further, we expected these individual differences to be related to self-reported empathy, respect for authority, moral identity, and sensitivity to moral emotions, such as disgust, as well as concerns about moral purity, which may reflect a fear of moral contagion.

## 2. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to operationalize imaginative resistance in a self-report scale developed with reference to the philosophical literature. Items were generated and selected based on four factors believed to cause resistance that were most salient in the philosophical literature. Author failure due to lack of skill or authority (cf. Driver, 2008; Gendler, 2006; Matravers, 2003; Stueber, 2011; Todd, 2009), was the first hypothesized factor, Authorial Authority. Readers' ability to imaginatively engage with fiction (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Todd, 2009; Weinberg & Meskin, 2006) comprised the second factor, Ease of Imagining. Fear of generalizing from the author's and character's morality (e.g., Brock, 2012; Gendler, 2000, 2006; Murray, 2001) were the third and fourth hypothesized factors respectively. Testing the validity of this proposed four-factor structure depended on factor analysis and comparisons with measures of related constructs. We encountered no existing instruments that measure these constructs directly; nor were we able to find a scale that assessed the general fear of moral contagion that we believed might underlie some aspect of imaginative resistance. The closest match was the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011), which explores five basic moral instincts that tend to vary along with political and social views (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007).

We used four of the five MFQ subscales to validate the IRS. The Respect for Authority subscale was used to approximate authorial authority; to the extent that imaginative resistance is caused by breakdown of the author's authority, a negative correlation would be expected. The combined Harm and Fairness subscales served as a general measure of moral concerns, along with another measure of morality (Black & Reynolds, 2016) that assesses both the importance placed both on moral principles and on acting accord to them. The MFQ Purity subscale is related to avoiding acts that violate principles of sanctity as well as disgusting things such as excrement; we used it to assess the degree to which the IRS reflected fear of contagion. We expected moderately strong correlations between the IRS and these measures of morality, as well as with empathy. Finally, we measured disgust sensitivity. Disgust has also been shown to influence moral judgment (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), and the relationship between disgust and moral judgment may be explained by a fear of contamination (Inbar & Pizarro, 2013). As such, we also predicted a positive correlation between disgust sensitivity and scores on the IRS.

### *2.1. Study 1a*

#### *2.1.1. Method*

*2.1.1.1. Participants and procedure.* Two hundred and seventy-one participants age 18 to 70 ($M = 26$, $SD = 11$; 76% female) were recruited via online social networking sites and completed a 20 min Qualtrics survey. (Design and data collection for all studies were approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board). The sample was international, with 34% of respondents reporting nationalities other than the USA. Respondents from non-English speaking countries were excluded due to language concerns. Individual mean imputation was used in cases where at least 80% of the items on a scale were complete. The survey included

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