

GIVING POEMS: MOTIVATION AND PERSONALITY IN THE READING AND SHARING OF POETRY

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Background Research

Most of the psychological work on poetry has investigated the poet (Mason, Mort, Woo, 2015; Jamison, 1989) or the expressive act of writing poetry (Fink & Drake, 2016, Coulehan & Clary, 2005). The National Poetry Foundation commissioned a study in 2006 that examined the general habits of the American public in terms of reading and sharing poetry. This survey found:

- ✓ 14% of American population reads poetry.
- ✓ Readers in general and poetry readers in particular tend to be women with higher level of education.
- ✓ Poetry readers are not loners – high amounts of leisure activity and high sociability.
- ✓ Poetry readers tend to have read poetry as children.
- ✓ Poetry readers are readers across all genres.
- ✓ 50% of regular poetry readers have shared a poem with someone compared to 22% of non-readers.

...“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Mary Oliver. “The Summer Day” from *New and Selected Poems*, 1992, Beacon Press, Boston, MA

Jean-Honoré Fragonard. (1776).
A Young Girl Reading.



References

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- Jamison, K. R. (1989). "Mood Disorders and Patterns of Creativity in British Writers and Artists." *Psychiatry*, 52: 125-134. 1989-36612-001
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This is just to say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast



Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

William Carlos Williams, 1962.

Hypothesis

This pilot study explored personality differences between those who read and share poetry and those who do not.

1. It was predicted that women would share poetry more often than men.
2. Those who read and share poetry would be higher on all Big Five Personality factors, expert extraversion as measured by the BFI.

Method

Participants

- N=231 (78% Female & 21% Male)
- Ages ranged from 18 to 94 (M = 52, SD = 17.2)
- 95% College or Graduate School Educated)
- High SES

Materials

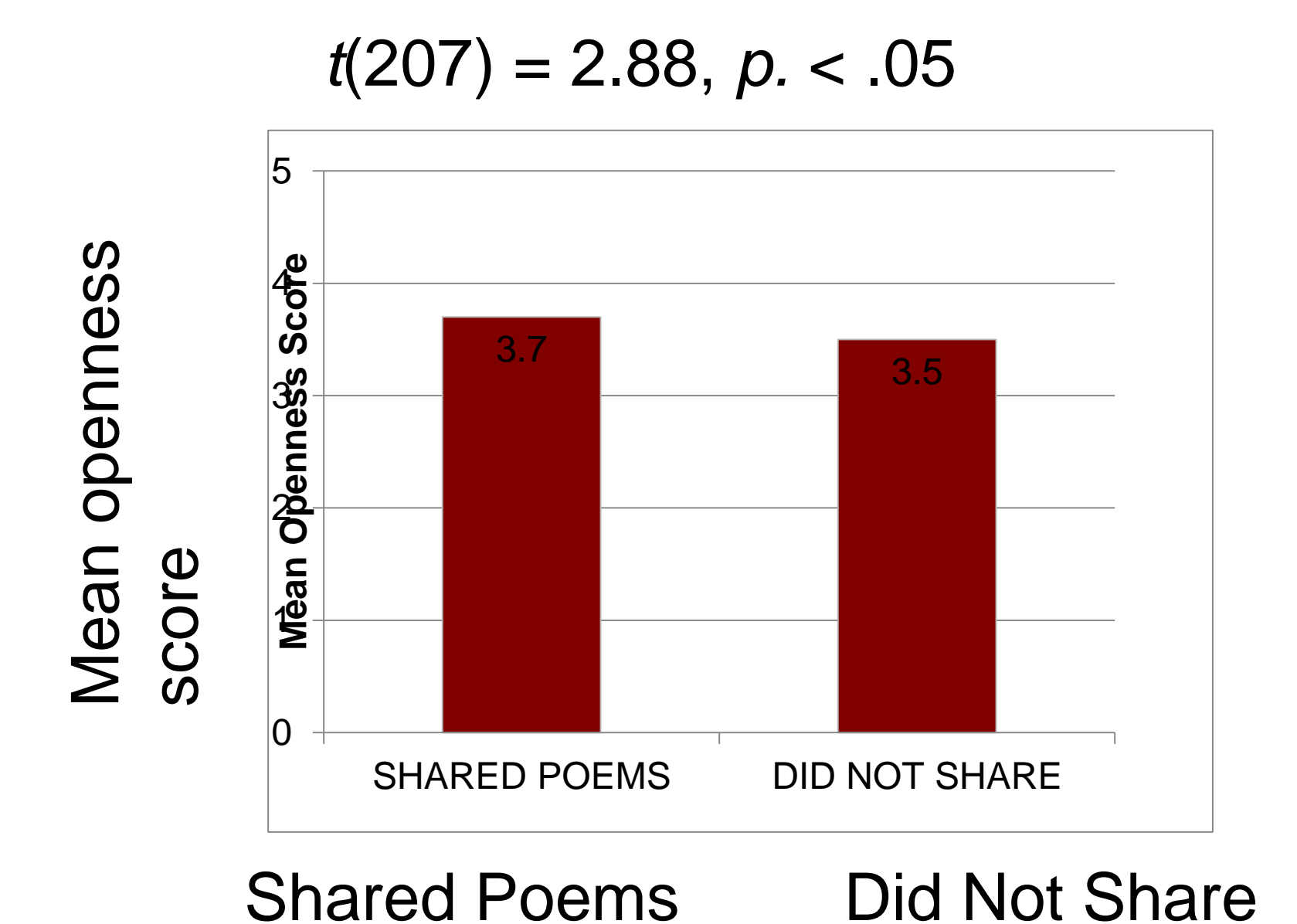
- Demographics Questionnaire (10 items)
- Poetry Questionnaire (28 items)
- Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) , *OCEAN*, (Goldberg, 1993).

Procedure

- Online survey using SurveyMonkey.com; snow-ball sampling

Results

- 50% of poetry readers read poetry more than 1x per month (daily, to weekly, to 1x per month)
- 75% of sample had someone share a poem with them in last five years (vs. 65% in a national sample)
- Women were more likely to share poetry compared to men, $X^2(1) = (4.70)$, $p < .05$
- People who share their own poetry have significantly more openness on the Big 5 compared to those who do not share their own poetry ($p > .05$) (See below)



- Among those who said that reading and writing poetry helps them to deal with difficult life circumstances, there was a significantly higher percentage of women, $X^2(1) = 41.88, p < .01$

Conclusions

- The first hypothesis was supported.
- The second hypothesis was generally unsupported. However, one Big Five personality variable was significantly related to the sharing (not reading) of poetry: Openness
- Major issue in methodology: Participants self-selected out of study if they were non-poetry readers
- Future research should include a more gender-based analysis on the usefulness of poetry in healing/ treatment.