THE VICTORIAN FOLK PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY AND LIFE GOALS

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Research Question

All literature embodies a folk psychology or implicit theory of human nature (Hogan, 1976). A basic research question in the psychology of literature is the degree to which the folk psychology of an historical period's literature (a) reflects human nature as understood objectively by modern psychologists, or (b) constructs an arbitrary view peculiar to a particular time and place.

The research described here investigates the folk psychology embedded in the behavior of 583 characters in 145 canonical Victorian novels. Characters were rated on the Web by 986 readers of 19th Century British literature.
Rater Characteristics

1702 ratings contributed
986 different raters
281 male, 705 female
Mean age = 39.7, SD = 14.2
Educational Level
3 less than high school
27 high school graduate
102 some college, no degree
11 associate’s degree
209 bachelor’s degree
274 master’s degree
360 doctorate
When they read book
269 within past six months
242 within past year
300 within past five years
97 within past ten years
77 more than ten years ago
Why they read book
574 for own enjoyment
212 for class taken
199 for class taught
Character Demographics

- 583 characters rated
- Sex: 337 male, 246 female
- Role
  - 142 protagonists
  - 250 friends of protagonists
  - 103 antagonists
  - 32 friends of antagonists
  - 56 indeterminate
- Age
  - 9 1-12 years
  - 16 13-16 years
  - 128 17-23 years
  - 232 24-38 years
  - 130 39-59 years
  - 65 60+ years
- Physical attractiveness
  - M=2.26, SD =.76 on 3-point scale
- Marital status
  - 112 initially married
  - 255 find a spouse
- Goals
  - Achieving goal a main feature? 295 yes
  - Success in goal achievement
    - M=2.65, SD=.98 on 4-point scale
  - Root for character?
    - M=2.34, SD=.84 on 3-point scale
Overview of Psychological Variables

- **Character’s goals.** Participants rated the importance to the character of 12 goals described by evolutionary psychology (Hogan, 1996) and/or Holland’s (1997) theory of personality and vocational choice.

- **Character’s mate preferences.** Participants rated the importance to the character of seven mate preferences studied by Buss (1989).

- **Character’s personality.** Participants rated the character’s personality with the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).

- **Emotional responses.** Participants rated the degree to which they experienced 10 possible emotional responses to the character. Evolutionary analyses of emotions (Ekman, 1994; Plutchik, 2002) informed the choice of 10 emotional response scales.

All scales were subjected to a principle components factor analysis at the item level, and factor scores were used in subsequent analyses.
Rated Importance of Goals

- Physical survival
- Finding short-term romantic partner
- Finding or keeping a spouse
- Gaining or keeping wealth
- Gaining or keeping power
- Gaining or keeping prestige
- Obtaining education or culture
- Making friends and forming alliances
- Nurturing or fostering offspring and kin
- Aiding non-kin
- Building, creating, or discovering something
- Routine tasks to earn livelihood

Importance of all goals rated on 1-5 scale

Principle component factor analysis revealed five factors

- Social Dominance (acquiring status, power, and resources at the expense of others, in a zero-sum fashion; Hogan’s “getting ahead”)
- Constructive Effort (becoming educated while building coalitions and helping others in a nonzero-sum fashion; Hogan’s “getting along”)
- Raising a Family
- Bonding in Intimate Relationships
- Physically Surviving
## Factor Analysis of Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
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Long-Term Mate Preferences

- Physical attractiveness
- Wealth
- Power
- Prestige
- Intelligence
- Kindness
- Reliability

Desirability of each characteristic in a spouse rated on a 1-5 scale

Principle component factor analysis revealed three factors

- Extrinsic Characteristics (wealth, power, prestige)
- Intrinsic Characteristics (intelligence, kindness, reliability)
- Physical Attractiveness

- Factor scores used in subsequent analyses
### Factor Analysis of Mate Preferences

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<th>Extrinsic Characteristics</th>
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<td><strong>Reliability</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Physical Attractiveness</strong></td>
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Emotional Reactions to Characters

- Anger
- Disgust
- Contempt
- Fear of the character
- Fear for the character
- Sadness
- Admiration
- Liking
- Amazement
- Indifference

Reactions rated on 1-5 scale

Principal component factor analysis revealed three factors
- *Dislike*
- *Sympathy*
- *Fascination*

Factor scores used in subsequent analyses
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<th>Sympathy</th>
<th>Fascination</th>
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<td>Fear for character</td>
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<td>Indifference</td>
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</table>
Personality

- Personality rated with TIP (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003)
- Characters rated on 7-point scale
  1. _____ Extraverted, enthusiastic.
  2. _____ Critical, quarrelsome.
  3. _____ Dependable, self-disciplined.
  4. _____ Anxious, easily upset.
  5. _____ Open to new experiences, complex.
  6. _____ Reserved, quiet.
  7. _____ Sympathetic, warm.
  8. _____ Disorganized, careless.
  9. _____ Calm, emotionally stable.
  10. _____ Conventional, uncreative.

Principle component factor analysis confirmed the Big Five factors
- Extraversion
- Agreeableness
- Conscientiousness
- Emotional Stability
- Openness to Experience

Factor scores used in subsequent analyses
ANOVA's: Character Type Differences

- Character typology defined by
  - Sex (male, female)
  - Valence (good, bad)
  - Status (major, minor)
- 2x2x2 ANOVAs examined differences on psychological variables
- Age differences in personality analyzed
- Predictions from evolutionary theory:
  - Both sexes value intrinsic characteristics
  - Males value physical attractiveness
  - Females value extrinsic characteristics
- Predictions from personality research
  - on Agreeableness, Females > Males
  - on Emotional Stability, Males > Females
  - over lifespan, observe increases in
    - Agreeableness
    - Conscientiousness
    - Emotional Stability;
    - decreases in
    - Extraversion
    - Openness to Experience
ANOVA Results

Mate Preferences
As predicted, main effect of sex on **Extrinsic Attributes**, Females > Males (p < .001)
Also as predicted, no sex differences on **Intrinsic Attributes**, but there is a main effect of Valence, Good > Bad (p < .001)
Qualified confirmation, Sex x Valence interaction on **Physical Attractiveness**, Good Males > Good Females (p < .001) & Good Males > Bad Males (p < .05)

Personality Differences
as predicted,
on Agreeableness, Females > Males
on Emotional Stability, Males > Females

Age Differences
as predicted
Conscientiousness and Stability increase
Openness decreases, but
Agreeableness decreases, and
Extraversion curvilinear
Male and female protagonists have very similar personality profiles, marked by peaks on Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness.

Male and female antagonists have similar profiles, distinguished by low Agreeableness and Openness. Bad females are also distinguished by low Emotional Stability.
Personality across the Life Span

Personality Factors across the Life Span

- Extraversion
- Agreeableness
- Conscientiousness
- Stability
- Openness

Standardized Scores

1-12  13-16  17-23  24-38  39-59  60+
Personality Correlates

Goals

Social Dominance primarily a function of high Extraversion and low Agreeableness

Constructive Effort primarily a function of high Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness

Raising a Family primarily a function of high Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and low Openness

Bonding in Intimate Relationships primarily a function of high Extraversion and Agreeableness

Physical Survival not well predicted

Goal Achievement

Consistent with I/O literature, goal achievement correlates with high Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability. Not predicted was a correlation with Agreeableness

Mate Preferences

Consistent with sex research literature, Physical Attractiveness is important to Extraverts

Extraverted, Disagreeable characters are attracted to Extrinsic Characteristics

Agreeable, Conscientious, Open characters are attracted to Intrinsic Characteristics
## Personality Correlates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Interests (N=579; r=.09 p &lt; .05)</th>
<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Agreeableness Conscientiousness</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Openness</th>
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<th>Goal Achievement (N=583; r=.09 p &lt; .05)</th>
<th>Extraversion</th>
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<th>Emotional Responses (N=582; r=.09 p &lt; .05)</th>
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<th>Age (N=580; r=.10 p &lt; .05)</th>
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## Personality & Demographics in Regressions

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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Valence</th>
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<th>Age Physical Attractiveness</th>
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<td>1=male 2=female</td>
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Conclusions – 1

1. Victorian folk psychology accurately reflects a number of research findings from personality and evolutionary psychology.

2. Goals pursued by characters cluster into categories deemed important by evolutionary psychology: getting ahead, getting along, raising a family, bonding, and surviving.

3. On mate preferences, females are more concerned with extrinsic characteristics than males, and good males are more concerned with physical attractiveness than good females.

4. Males show more emotional stability than females, and several established age differences in personality were confirmed.

5. Personality correlates of goals pursued, goal achievement and mate preference mirror those found by empirical research.
Conclusions –2

1. At the same time, some results reflect unique characteristics of Victorian thought rather than empirical relations found in modern psychological science.

2. Older characters are more disagreeable than younger characters, a trend opposite the one found in modern research.

3. Valence (whether a character is good or bad) is a very powerful predictor. Protagonists and antagonists have strikingly different personality profiles and draw distinctive emotional responses. Valence overshadowed some expected sex differences in personality and mate preference.

4. The folk psychology of Victorian authors is therefore not merely reflecting psychological facts; it also sends a moral message to which both Victorian and modern audiences resonate emotionally.
References


