

Evolutionary Personality Psychology: Integrating the Many Functional Adaptations That Make Us Who We Are

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INTRODUCTION

Who are you? Any answer to this question will be narrative. The story of your life as you tell it, with you as the protagonist—no matter how tragic or actually heroic. However, that is who you perceive yourself to be, and how you present yourself. It really is not who you are, even though your self-processing may influence how you feel. At best, it is an approximation of your traits, filtered through self-serving bias and other cognitive distortions and your current emotional state.

Few such stories are truly true. They are a result of creative memory, current mood and mode, and established narrative schemas. Moreover, and even more fascinating to me, and maybe to any scientifically oriented personality psychologist, is the storyline and standard hero character you rely on when answering questions about who you are when being administered empirically based personality tests. Can these tests portray you as you really are? No, they provide, yet again, merely approximations. Despite very reasonable reliability, the predictive validity still leaves something to be desired—with the odd addition of being a standardized test situation. How you actually answer the test items is part of how the test predicts who you are. Good old stimulus/response.

Scientific personality psychology has generally two basic aims: (1) to describe in detail the structures and processes of personality (the bits and pieces and how they interact and develop); (2) to measure these in such a manner

as to allow us to predict the individual's future behavior. Why do individual differences exist? That may be answered ontogenetically through developmental and behavioral genetic studies, describing how different traits and characteristics are formed. However, that is really the answer to the “how” question. The “why” question needs to be answered with an evolutionary approach (Buss 1991; Grøntvedt and Kennair 2010, 2015).

ARE WE REALLY INTUITIVE PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGISTS?

This is not the place for getting into lengthy objections toward group selection; however, I do recommend considering the view of Pinker (2016) on this. An important point of contention is whether our folk psychology belief in stable features of other people is something upon which we may base our predictions about their future behavior. Dan McAdams (in this issue) suggests that our fundamental perception of people having inherent and stable qualities is correct and adaptive, while within social psychology this is often considered to be slightly biased (Ross 1977). Further, rather than being a somewhat arbitrary result of lexicographical and factor-analytical approaches, the Big Five factors (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) are indirectly suggested to be the domains we evolved to evaluate in conspecifics. I do not think there are grounds for that assertion.

Different factor solutions might have been informed from a truly evolutionary approach. I have not seen any clear evidence suggesting that the Big Five needed to actually be these specific factors, caused by our evolved mechanisms for perceiving other people. When Nettle (2011) considers evolutionary perspectives on the Big Five, it is to argue for how these different domains and their facets may have evolved as relevant psychological domains, not that we have evolved the Big Five as natural categories of human behavior.

Mind reading probably evolved, too. With a combination of a basic folk psychology understanding of traits and stable individual differences (albeit not conceptualized as the Big Five traits) and an understanding of basic, universal motives and agency, our ability to predict people's behavior probably increased. At least to some degree. We still have biases in our social cognition, and I must admit I worry that we are not always very good at predicting behavior, as Robyn Dawes (1994) pointed out years ago. Records of previous behavior, and group data based statistical tests, are better than human experts at predicting individual behavior. I dare say that once we start using fiction, stories, and unsubstantiated theories to understand other people, we might run the risk of believing our story, despite it being prejudice and falsehood. The world rarely works like Dame Agatha Christie's Miss Marple stories, where personality types from the village of St. Mary Mead would predict the behavior and motives of the suspects of every murder mystery the dear old woman came across. Characters in stories are personality types, but rather than type-based prediction, modern personality psychology would favor trait-based prediction. The kernel of truth in this kind of stereotype is just too small.

EVOLUTIONARY PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY: THE ADAPTIVE MODULES OF OUR MIND

So, if we are not able to tell true stories about ourselves, or really assess other people's personality accurately, does this mean that I am

suggesting that mental evolution does not happen or that we have not evolved to play social chess? No. I just am not a pan-adaptationist. Our bodies house many evolved imperfections. We have blind spots in our sight, we have backaches caused by bipedal motion, we are susceptible to virus, bacteria, and cancer, and, as the joke goes, a waste disposal pipeline runs through a perfectly good recreational area. We probably do have evolved personality traits and individual differences, because different solutions might be good in different social and environmental ecologies (Nettle 2011; Buss and Penke 2015)—just as Darwin's finches have different bill morphs. Despite selection in general removing genetic variance (Tooby and Cosmides 1990), individual differences and traits may be selected in different directions because of ecological conditions and problems.

We partake in social deceit, telling falsehoods and tall stories. We do not even have insight into all processes of our mind or brain. We are different beings in different contexts, but simultaneously we overly perceive personal continuity. There is situation-person interaction. Further, we often explain our actions with circumstances rather than our own proclivities and shortcomings. And we are beyond doubt storytelling animals (Gottschall 2012). Whether stories really change us, though, is a different story.

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD IT BEFORE . . .

To tell a truly new story is difficult. It is even more difficult to tell a story so new that the characters are unlike anyone we have ever heard of before. It is almost impossible to make people listen or care about truly inhuman characters and storylines. McAdams suggests, "It also seems reasonable to predict that the stories human beings will tell about themselves 500 years from now will sound very different from the life stories we know and hear today." I disagree. They might describe new cultural

practices, new technology—compared to current literature every story in the future will be science fiction—but I do not believe they will be entirely alien to us. The stories we know, tell, and hear today echo stories we have been telling for millennia. They do so because they reflect universal human desires and traits, typical human conflicts and bonds. Given the fact that our Big Five personality traits (Bouchard and McGue 2003) and their facets

(Jang, Livesley, and Vernon 1996) and other specific stable individual differences are influenced by genetics, there is no convincing reason to believe that we will be entirely different in 500 years. Even more unlikely is the prediction that our universal human nature should change that much. Nevertheless, many worry we might not be here in 500 years if our nature cannot be expressed differently—but that is a classic story, too, from Gilgamesh onward.

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