Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory

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Abstract

We examine three basic tropes—villain, victim, and hero—that emerge in images, claims, and narratives. We compare recent research on characters with the predictions of an established tradition, affect control theory (ACT). Combined, the theories describe core traits of the villain-victim-hero triad and predict audiences' reactions. Character theory (CT) can help us understand the cultural roots of evaluation, potency, and activity profiles and the robustness of profile ratings. It also provides nuanced information regarding multiplicity in, and subtypes of, characters and how characters work together to define roles. Character types can be strategically deployed in political realms, potentially guiding strategies, goals, and group dynamics. ACT predictions hold up well, but CT suggests several paths for extension and elaboration. In many cases, cultural research and social psychology work on parallel tracks, with little cross-talk. They have much to learn from each other.

On October 9, 2012, 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai went to school, despite the Taliban's intense campaign to stop female education in her region of Pakistan and despite its death threats against her and her father. On the ride home, a masked gunman boarded the bus, asked for Malala by name, and shot her in the head. This event inspired an outpouring of support and political action, with protests in Pakistan and a global petition that garnered two million signatures in support of Malala and her right to an education. She survived, won a Nobel Peace Prize, and started the Malala Fund, an advocacy group for girls' rights to education across the globe.

Malala was just one of many young victims of Taliban violence in Pakistan, including one attack in December 2014 that killed 132 schoolchildren and another in January 2016 where 22 people were gunned down at a university. Why did Malala's story touch Western audiences, resulting in widespread sympathy, charity, and political action, while other attacks garnered far less attention? Why do some cases spark extensive concern and activism while others never make the newspapers?

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The image or story of an individual often grabs more attention than statistics. Slovic and colleagues find that people are more willing to help one person than many; even moving from one to two needy children decreases positive feelings about donating and actually lowers donations (Slovic 2007; Västfjäll et al. 2014). In a numbing effect, numbers mask individuals, and without that humanizing element, people seem less inclined to send a check or join a protest. Statistics run the danger of depicting "'human beings with the tears dried off,' that fail to spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action" (Slovic 2007:1).

One way to reattach the human to the statistic so that it sparks attention and compassion is to tell a compelling story that makes sense of the world; narratives can paint details about abstract, distant issues and help them resonate with everyday lives. They bring tension and suspense, compelling notice and interest. In political arenas, storytelling can be a powerful strategy, especially for vulnerable and marginalized populations (Swerts 2015). Narrative theory—which identifies the elements of stories that resonate with audiences—has become a central tool in social and political analysis (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000; Polletta 2006).

Less understood are the characters who populate the stories and drive their action. Stories interest us because of the humans who make choices, feel torn between competing actions, attach and detach themselves from others, suffer, triumph, and have a good time in between. They *do* things; but they also *are* certain kinds of people. They are familiar to us both from real life and the fictional and political tropes that we construct. We find characters in narratives but also outside them, drafted through images, facts, and folk psychology (Gilbert 1998; Jasper, Young, and Zuern forthcoming).

Diverse genres such as myth, fiction, advertising, and politics offer familiar characters, especially the villain, victim, and hero (Clément, Lindemann, and Sangar 2017). Villains focus blame, provide a clear target for action, intensify negative emotions, and solidify group identities. A correctly cast victim—good, innocent, and in need of protection—can also motivate action and encourage recruitment to a cause; it can help to increase perceptions that a particular problem is an injustice worth combatting. Heroes form a rallying point, increase agreement among members, and boost commitment to a cause. Villain-victim-hero is the "essential triad" of protest, mobilization for war, constructing social problems, and many other instances of political oratory (Jasper et al. 2018). Minions—malevolent but weak—are less central, but they are useful tropes for ridiculing opponents.

Although they rarely address characters directly, sociologists use concepts like charisma and reputation in ways that help us understand character work, the construction of these moral characters. Sociology's attention to character lies mostly in its understanding of the pathways along which reputations spread (Fine 2001). In politics, these run primarily through the media, although personal networks also carry gossip and jokes, influential bits of character work (Hunzaker 2014, 2016). Social inequalities also shape reputations, not only in access to resources but through the deployment of group stereotypes (Fiske 2012). Are women strong enough to be proper heroes? Are stigmatized minorities good enough to be sympathetic victims?

This paper compares new research into characters, which with hopeful exaggeration we will call character theory (CT), with the well-established tradition of

affect control theory (ACT) to understand how and why characters are constructed. From CT, we see that people easily relate to characters and that two traits—goodness and power—prevail in defining character types (Jasper et al. 2018, forthcoming). It focuses on the active character work that corporations, media, lawyers, and political players do. From ACT, we find that characters tap into widely shared cultural identities and that individuals are motivated to maintain these meanings. ACT also details the importance of a third dimension, active versus passive. Although both are cultural approaches and highlight emotions, CT comes out of the analysis of cultural products, while ACT speaks to the social psychology of individuals and their motivations (although ACT has also been applied to news texts: Ahothali and Hoey 2015; Joseph et al. 2016). We can use the findings of CT to test ACT predictions for these three identities. And because CT was developed largely to understand political rhetoric, we can better see how ACT applies to politics.

We briefly summarize CT and ACT, integrate the two theories, and analyze what ACT data show about the basic character tropes. We then discuss suggestions from CT that we feel might extend ACT, including the special nature of political arenas, in which players try to influence sentiments for strategic purposes, the use of visual as well as verbal information, and understanding multidimensionality, nuance, and ambiguity in identities. CT also helps us understand the cultural roots of evaluation-potency-activity profiles: how fundamental sentiments come to be established and maintained. EPA profile ratings are remarkably consistent, but understanding their origins in historical eras, artifacts, and cultural conflict could suggest when we might expect them to be more stable, when less stable. Characters also demonstrate the value-added of building nuance into identities, suggesting an expanded use of modifiers in understanding events.

In many fields of sociology, cultural analysis and social psychology have covered the same ground but with different methods, classic references, and units of analysis (Jasper 2017). As complementary traditions, each should benefit from engaging the other more. We hope to provide an example of that dialogue.

BACKGROUND

Character Theory

A theory of moral characters has developed in recent years out of cultural analyses of politics and protest. Jasper et al. (2018, forthcoming) weave together threads from rhetoric, cognitive psychology, literary theory, visual analysis, rumor theory, and performance theory, applying them to characters found today in political arenas ranging from elections to wars to protest campaigns. Partly an extension of narrative theory and partly a critique of narrative theory's focus on plots to the exclusion of characters, these authors revive a sociological tradition that saw basic characters as embodiments, attacks, or mockery of a society's basic values (Goode 1978; Klapp 1962). Unlike ACT, much of its analysis is of visual images of characters (Bonnell 1997).

This emerging character theory (CT) uses two basic dimensions to define characters traditionally found in literature and still found today in political rhetoric. The first is moral quality as shown through good or bad intentions and actions. The second dimension concerns power, separating those who are relatively weak or ineffectual from those who can get things done. Table 1 shows the main characters and some subtypes derived from crossing these dimensions (Jasper et al. forthcoming).

Table 1. Main Characters by Power and Intent.

	Strong	Weak

Benevolent	Heroes
	  Martyrs, saints, and survivors
	   (start in cell across)
	  Judges, Donors
	  Converts (start in cell below)
	  Friends
		Victims
		  Good clowns
		  Sympathetic bystanders
		  Followers and supporters

Malevolent	Villains
	  Traitors (start in cell above)
	  Outside agitators
	  Foes
		Minions
		  Bad clowns
		  Cowardly bystanders
		  Scoundrels

Heroes are strong and well-intentioned, even when it takes some time and effort to find or motivate them (O'Neill 1993). They are the players who must set things right and protect others. A protest or interest group presents itself as heroic in its fundraising letters: it can and must prevail against evil. An American presidential candidate offers to save the nation from moral malaise or the free world from terrorists. Heroes struggle bravely, which is why they are admirable—and also why they need our support. American politicians describe the United States itself as a hero in the world, intervening on behalf of less fortunate nations threatened by villains, whenever they need to arouse domestic support for wars (Dower 1986; McDougall 1997).

Sources of heroes' strength can include personal physical power, intelligence, various technical skills such as firing a gun, virility, creativity, bravery, aristocratic birth, supernatural favor or lineage, wealth, even moral purity. Beyond the individual, strength can also come from large numbers or social connections necessary to mobilize others. These sources can be in tension with each other, such as brute strength versus intelligence, and heroes who have one type of power often clash with heroes who have another (Alexander 2010). Such traits are similar to "modifiers" in ACT.

Heroes' sources of goodness also differ: innocence, protecting others, conformity to valued norms, a willingness to sacrifice oneself for others, generosity, or merely being helpful. Most forms of goodness are unconnected to strength. You can still try to protect or help others without being powerful, although power helps you succeed. The hero can also demonstrate moral goodness in her style of action. Klapp (1964:228, 230) suggests that the hero has more straightforward forms of aggression than the villain. Whereas the villain exhibits "sneakiness, backbiting, innuendo, mudslinging, bullying, domineering, quarrel-picking, and cruelty," the hero relies on "pluck, cockiness in an underdog, audacity, humor, satire, honest man-to-man slugging, and nonviolent pressure."

Villains are malevolent and strong enough to menace others, lending some urgency to stopping them. Fear and hatred of villains are among the most powerful emotions in political conflict (Cohen 1972; Dower 1986). Political leaders deploy anxieties and outrage to draw people out of their daily routines and prepare them for the sacrifices of public life, even war. To present villains as both powerful and secretive is to heighten the urgency. We construct villains for the powerful emotions they inspire in audiences who fear and hate them. They

focus blame, transforming anxiety and frustration into indignation and purpose, fear into anger (Gamson 1992:29). They reinforce negative feelings toward outgroups (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

A villain's strengths come from the same list as the hero's. Intelligence becomes wily cunning, virility becomes disrespect for women. Wealth and nobility are corrupting, physical strength is now brutish. Only bravery disappears from the list, as it has an unavoidable moral admixture: villains are rarely self-sacrificing. In fact, recognition of opponents' valor transforms them from villains into heroes, at least in part. Just as heroes can be superhuman, with god-like qualities, so villains can appear inhumanly strong. Evil sorcerers have magical powers. But villains need not be smart. Instead, they may be viewed as forces of nature, beastlike predators who are powerful and threatening but incapable of reasoning. Many of the folk devils of moral panics are characterized this way, like the young African Americans accused of "wilding" and related delinquency in recent decades (Cohen 1972). If some villains are superhuman, others are subhuman (Smith 2011).

According to CT, we feel warmly enough toward victims to want to aid them since they are too weak to save themselves (Jasper et al. 2018). Victims have long been a staple of research into the construction of social problems and protest rhetoric (Best 1997). Indignation over injustice is the core motivation behind protest, and it follows that there must be someone who has been treated unjustly. Victims testify, their stories are elaborated in detail, photos of their wounds (figurative or literal) are published, all in an effort to arouse moral anger (Whittier 2009). If character work can create a victim, then there must be a wrong to be righted. In politics, the establishment of a victim usually precedes the search for villains or heroes. The most sympathetic victims are good and powerless. We pity them and want to help them. It is hard to watch them suffer.

As strong, active characters, both heroes and villains often have sidekicks who aid or support them. Heroes' helpers share the goodness traits of their mentors but do not have the same levels of power. Villains' supporters are traditionally known as *minions*, a term given new currency by a series of recent films. The movies get it right: minions are small, numerous, and given to high-pitched chatter. Minions are dangerous only when massed together and led by a villain (or a demagogue).

A familiar character provides a recurrent, simplified package of intentions and capacities that we expect to find together; our imaginations fuse cognitive understandings, moral judgments, emotional responses, and expectations for behavior. Characters are familiar tropes because they are conveyed by diverse media, both fictional and nonfictional. Narratives, rhetoric, ideologies, frames, and the like shape our understandings largely through the characters they create. When we see photos, caricatures, and other visual images, we can sum up a character in a split second (Willis and Todorov 2006).

Characters are caricatures, oversimplifications that exaggerate certain features of a player and ignore many of its complexities. They essentialize. Character workers exaggerate their heroes' goodness and their opponents' viciousness. Victims become more pure and innocent, minions more ridiculous. Literary theorists have recognized that the power of characters lies in our emotional reactions to them rather than simply their ability to condense cognitive information (Lynch 1998). We pity or hate them, trust and admire them. The emotions we feel for characters are the motor propelling

narrative, giving it resonance (Clément et al. 2017).

CT does not offer formal predictions as ACT does. Like many interpretive approaches, it highlights what it claims are relevant, influential processes: characters get streamlined and stereotyped for rhetorical and emotional impact. Character tropes also dramatize the boundaries between in- and outgroups, making outgroup villains appear more threatening, ingroup victims more threatened, and ingroup heroes stronger and more admirable. These group boundaries become "electrified" in political and international conflicts (Hoggett 1992).

Affect Control Theory: Maintenance of Meanings

If CT identifies the main characters in political rhetoric, affect control theory explains why characters resonate with audiences. ACT describes the processes through which cultural perceptions of identities, behaviors, settings, and other concepts affect people's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Heise 1979, 2007; MacKinnon and Heise 2010; Smith-Lovin 1979). As a branch of symbolic interactionism, ACT assumes that we bring expectations to a situation but then also react to what happens. Its core premise is that individuals create events to confirm "sentiments" that they already have about themselves and others and that when sentiments are not maintained, then individuals redescribe themselves and others (Heise 2002; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2006). The benefit is stability; the world makes sense. Through this process, people perform the social roles that maintain society.

Like character theory, ACT draws on expectations of goodness and power to define identities but adds the dimension of how active or passive identities may be. People react to things in their environment by assigning them "affective meaning" along three main dimensions: evaluation (good or bad), potency (strong or weak), and activity (lively or sluggish), abbreviated as EPA (Heise 2007; Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). The dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity serve as "cultural abbreviations" that summarize important social information about the components of interactions, which include identities, behaviors, emotions, and settings (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2006:140). ACT scholars have used surveys to develop dictionaries with EPA profile ratings of these elements that vary from –4.3 to +4.3. Negative numbers indicate badness, powerlessness, and passivity; positive numbers show goodness, power, and activity. Thus, the profile for "hero" averaged across several data sets is: evaluation = 2.61, potency = 2.69, activity = 1.39 (see Table 2); heroes are very good, very strong, and moderately active.[1]

Our sentiments about actors, behaviors, and objects are not always confirmed in everyday life. When we see reports of pedophile priests, brutal police, or unloving mothers, our expectations are dashed, and we may feel shock or confusion. When there is a mismatch between what we expect and what we see, this produces "deflection": people are motivated to maintain meanings in their world, and when such meanings are disconfirmed, this produces uncomfortable tension or stress that motivates action to restore the meanings. With high levels of deflection, people are left with the unsettling sense that the world has become strange or unreal, a troubling place in which to live. Unresolved deflection can lead to psychological stress (Heise 2007). In the

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[1]The tables use sex-averaged scores. For data sets that only presented evaluation, potency, and activity (EPA) profile ratings separated by sex, the male and female means were averaged.

Table 2. Hero Evaluation, Potency, and Activity (EPA) Ratings across Data Sets.

Character	Evaluation	Potency	Activity	Location	Year
Hero	2.01	2.29	1.45	Northern Ireland	1977
Hero	2.07	2.31	1.05	USA: North Carolina	1978
Hero	2.28	2.14	1.54	Canada: Ontario	1980
Hero	1.31	2.47	1.05	Germany	1989
Hero	1.96	2.60	1.73	Japan	1989
Hero	2.56	2.47	1.88	USA: Texas	1998
Hero	2.62	2.63	1.68	China	1991
Hero	2.67	2.57	1.70	Canada: Ontario	2001
Hero	2.84	2.58	2.22	USA: Indiana	2002
Hero	2.43	3.04	1.83	Germany	2007
Hero	2.60	2.34	.19	Egypt	2015
Hero	2.85	2.49	.03	Morocco	2015
Hero	3.63	3.45	1.54	USA: Georgia and North Carolina	2015
Hero	3.68	3.48	1.46	USA: University of Georgia	2015
Hero	3.63	3.43	1.55	USA: University of Georgia/Duke	2015

Note: The average across all data sets is evaluation = 2.61, potency = 2.69, activity = 1.39.

face of such discrepancies, people are motivated to plan and enact new events "to return feelings to normal" (Heise 1979:20).

Integrating Character Theory and Affect Control Theory

While several studies have investigated how ACT could be used to evaluate different narrative forms, such as folktales, frames, retellings, and newspaper articles (Ahothali and Hoey 2015; Dunphy and MacKinnon 2002; Hunzaker 2016; Shuster and Campos-Castillo 2017), few have asked how narrative and character analysis might improve or expand concepts in affect control theory. In one extension, Joseph et al. (2016) develop a model they apply to newspaper articles on the Arab uprisings that can extract social events from text and generate affective meanings for identities and behaviors not currently in ACT dictionaries. Just as models can now rely on public texts to help define EPA ratings, we can also turn to other cultural artifacts to better understand fundamental sentiments.

Cultures both acquire and lose identities over time. For example, a revised edition of a standard dictionary for students of English (Oxford University Press) included the new identities of *control freak, doula, spin doctor*, and *webmaster*, while a dictionary from the 1800s (Bartlett 1848) reveals identities that have since faded: *nimshi, scrouge*, and *stag* (MacKinnon and Heise 2010:30). Character theory can speak to the staying power of identities that become embedded in social artifacts or match well-known plots. While EPA ratings tend to be stable, shifts do occur. For instance, in looking at measures over 14 years, MacKinnon and Luke (2002) found political identities to be losing respect and sexuality identities increasing in evaluation. Analysis of characters could help to detect ACT identities that may be vulnerable to shifting fundamental sentiments. People have clear expectations about the role of "hero" due to its pervasive presence in childhood stories and beyond, but something like "bohemian," a rare character, may have less accord or be more subject to generational changes over time. Does

the identity tap into a stable character, increasing the likelihood of stronger cultural consensus around its meaning? Do cultural texts indicate a change in how identities are cast, suggesting modifications to cultural sentiments and by extension, EPA profiles?

Combinations of characters help define and solidify each other's roles. CT helps us understand the effects of identities conceptualized in groups (i.e., alongside other characters) rather than as separate entities. For instance, the ideal of hero is reached only when there are helpless others to save and a tyrant to defy. Christie (1986:25) notes this feedback effect between characters: "The more ideal the victim is, the more ideal becomes the offender. The more ideal the offender, the more ideal is the victim." ACT equations account for how identities and behaviors modify each other's evaluation, potency, and activity ratings in events. By looking at interactions, we can demonstrate how this intuitively occurs in narratives and how the presence of other characters helps to make certain features stronger and more salient.

CT extends identities beyond human individuals as we also perceive characters in our anthropomorphic projections onto animals, gods, groups, formal organizations, and sometimes even nations. We "personify" all these, treating them as if they were individual humans. These fictional humans are crucial in politics and marketing because they are often the players whose reputations and collective identities motivate action: to avenge the honor of the "nation" for instance, demand the rights of a community, or buy from a virtuous corporation (Marchand 1998). One extension for ACT would be to consider how actors manipulate their reputations, including the "brand" work done in business or politics to cultivate customers,

clients, and voters. And as Boyle and Meyer (2018) suggest, people hold cultural sentiments about specific celebrities, icons, and politicians—another potential for dictionary expansion.

CT challenges ACT to move further in two directions that it has already taken. One is to expand the use of modifiers, adjectives that change the basic identity. Thus, an "innocent" victim is rated differently from an "evil" victim, notably on evaluation. CT specializes in the many ways to describe someone as a villain, victim, or hero. CT also points to nonverbal sources of information; our reaction to a character differs depending on its size, gestures, colors, and even the sounds it makes. Findings from CT should contribute to the modifier inventories in ACT profile dictionaries, which incorporate cues about traits, moods, and status characteristics (e.g., angry, warm, young, middle-class, ugly, feminine). CT may have insight into which elements of appearance audiences react to most strongly, complementing ACT research on how emotional displays influence evaluations (Tsoudis and Smith-Lovin 1998).

Second, CT suggests that different institutional contexts may contain different processes for creating identities; political arenas in particular have incentives for exaggerating the evil of villains, innocence of victims, and power and goodness of heroes to create plots that stimulate action (Jasper et al. 2018). ACT has institutional filters such as law or politics to identify subsets of relevant concepts, and many dictionaries include settings, which can be used to situate interactions. CT suggests filters that would lead to an analysis of the rhetorical uses of identities as players try to arouse different emotions in their audiences. This intentional construction of identities has not been fully explored in ACT but is central

to politics where reputational battles abound. Motivations, too, could help shed light on how events are viewed. In this way, CT suggests research on the borders of ACT that would connect ACT more clearly to the kinds of institutional settings that many other areas of sociology examine.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The Essential Triad of Villain, Victim, Hero

Individuals are born into societies already structured with social identities and social categories (MacKinnon and Heise 2010). In colloquial English, there are about 10,000 identities for everyday situations. To cast as wide a net as possible, ACT dictionaries include obscure as well as common identities. Here we focus on villain, victim, and hero.

In addition to being distinct roles, CT's main characters are also clusters of roles: anyone who is coded as good and strong is a kind of hero, and so on. A small region of EPA space is heroic, another is villainous, a third represents victimhood. Through Heise's Interact program (see the following), we can find the identities that are most similar to any particular identity of interest through a function that identifies similar EPA scores. The three closest identities to heroes are best friend, true love, and brain; closest to villain are pimp, devil, and slave driver; to victim are homeless person, cripple, and mourner. Figure 1 presents the 15 identities closest to each of these in EPA space.

For heroes, ACT data support the expectations of character theory. Over a dozen EPA profile data sets, collected in multiple countries across 40 years, give heroes very positive ratings on evaluation and potency and moderately high ratings for activity level (see Table 2). In a recent data set, heroes are seen as the most "good" out of 930 identities

(Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2015).[2] CT helps explain the lower activity level: some heroes are "sleeping giants" who must be aroused to activity when they (or those they protect) are attacked. There is widespread suspicion of those who initiate strategic engagement, with all the dangers that carries (Jasper 2006). Rhetorically, heroes' initial passivity heightens their goodness as they only fight when provoked. The transformation from passive to active provides the emotional punch of many narratives, especially in politics.

Identities related to heroes are those marked by goodness and power. The other top identities ranked on goodness are: best friend, friend, brain, true love, God, angel, firefighter, soul mate, gentleman, and the ideal self ("myself as I would like to be"). Angels and firefighters certainly are heroes in many stories, but the personal ties are striking: best friends may not typically be viewed as heroes, but how many movies show exactly that, a best friend (sometimes furry) saving the day? That people strive to be heroes is telling as well. Of the top 50 good identities, only 1 is seen as powerless (baby), and only 2 others have power ratings close to neutral (granny and grandmother). Power and goodness go hand in hand (Osgood et al. 1957:108).[3]

Similarly, villains receive strong negative scores on evaluation but only moderately strong potency scores; they are not as strong as heroes. Across multiple data sets, the average profile for villain is: evaluation = −2.66, potency = .74, activity = 1.09 (see Table 3). In contrast,

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[2] The evaluation score was averaged across sex, using data collected at University of Georgia (UGA), 2015. Unless otherwise noted, all EPA profile examples in the paper are drawn from this data set. For women, hero was the highest rated good identity, and for men, hero was the second highest rated good identity, after true love.

[3] The correlation between evaluation and power for identities was .48 ($p < .001$; UGA 2015).
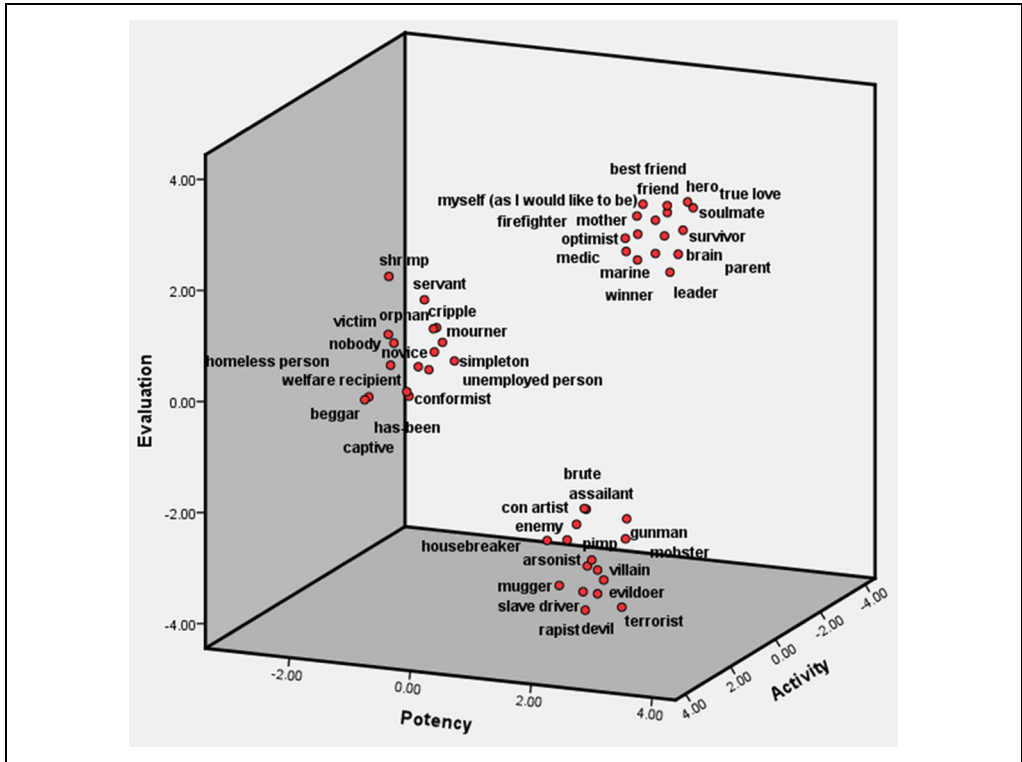
Figure 1. Hero, Villain, and Victim Identities in Evaluation, Potency, Activity (EPA) Space.

Table 3. Villain Evaluation, Potency, and Activity (EPA) Ratings across Data Sets.

Character	Evaluation	Potency	Activity	Location	Year
Villain	−1.72	.25	1.52	Northern Ireland	1977
Villain	−2.21	1.11	.95	USA: North Carolina	1978
Villain	−2.52	1.23	1.31	Canada: Ontario	1980
Villain	−2.53	1.28	.74	Japan	1989
Villain	−2.88	.47	−.54	China	1991
Villain	−2.56	1.46	.67	Canada: Ontario	2001
Villain	−2.55	.85	1.14	USA: Indiana	2002
Villain	−2.75	−1.48	1.73	Egypt	2015
Villain	−2.79	−1.68	1.55	Morocco	2015
Villain	−3.12	1.62	1.29	USA: Georgia and North Carolina	2015
Villain	−3.15	1.96	1.38	USA: University of Georgia	2015
Villain	−3.11	1.80	1.39	USA: University of Georgia/Duke	2015

Note: Average across all data sets: evaluation = −2.66, potency = .74, activity = 1.09.

CT views villains and heroes as equally strong. One reason may be CT's focus on political conflicts, in which threats need to be highlighted. Villains appear powerful when they attack heroes or victims, but their power recedes when justice—

Table 4. Victim Evaluation, Potency, and Activity (EPA) Ratings across Data Sets.

Character	Evaluation	Potency	Activity	Location	Year
Victim	−.10	−1.83	−.53	USA: North Carolina	1978
Victim	.67	−2.12	−1.04	Canada: Ontario	1980
Victim	−1.02	−2.24	−.66	Germany	1989
Victim	−1.16	−2.32	−.53	USA: Texas	1998
Victim	.42	−1.85	−1.36	China	1991
Victim	−.15	−2.64	−.17	Canada: Ontario	2001
Victim	−1.97	−2.41	−1.90	USA: Indiana	2002
Victim	−1.68	−2.92	−.10	Germany	2007
Victim	−.88	−.89	.74	Egypt	2015
Victim	−.86	−1.86	−1.12	Morocco	2015
Victim	−.30	−2.53	−1.26	USA: Georgia and North Carolina	2015
Victim	−.16	−2.57	−1.50	USA: University of Georgia	2015
Victim	−.17	−2.56	−1.45	USA: University of Georgia/Duke	2015

Note: Average across all data sets: evaluation = −.57, potency = −2.21, activity = −.84.

the hero—prevails. The immediate rhetorical needs of an arena differ from underlying cultural sentiments.

Focusing only on badness, the top 10 villains would be: child molester, wife abuser, rapist, murderer, kidnapper, terrorist, backstabber, racist, devil, and mugger. Limiting identities to at least slightly powerful (P = +1 or greater) the list becomes: rapist, murderer, kidnapper, terrorist, devil, mugger, evildoer, slave driver, and arsonist. These identities form the staple of many action thrillers chasing down serial killers and terrorists. Gone are the personal relationships marked by soul mates and friends; heroes may stop by for tea, but villains are a distinct other. Of the top 50 negative identities, only 15 (30 percent) had power ratings greater than 1, reflecting a cultural reluctance to concede strength to disapproved identities.

Part of evil is its mystery; normal people cannot quite fathom what motivates evil characters like Iago or Hitler. CT portrays political villains as active: if they are not, how can they be threatening? They must be plotting, conniving, and scheming in order for their evil intentions

to come out. In contrast to heroes, villains are always aggressing, always looking to start trouble—even when they are behind bars. There is no villainous equivalent of the sleeping giant. Indeed, a prime example of a bad, powerful, but quiet identity is a vampire, indicating a stretch to mythical creatures to fill this void, and even then, they have been occasionally recast in modern films to be less threatening. But if villains tend to be a little lower on the ACT potency scale than the activity scale, this may suggest that their sneaky ways are thought of as less potent acts. This difference may again reflect CT's focus on political characters.

Victims are very weak, as CT predicts—the tenth most powerless identity out of 930 (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2015). But they are not as good as CT expects when it takes "innocent children" as its exemplar (Jasper et al. forthcoming). There is some tendency toward neutrality (neither good nor bad), with both positive and negative scores given by different data sets, although there are more negative ones. The average profile for victim is: evaluation = −.57, potency = −2.21, activity = −.84 (Table 4). In ACT

data, the category of victim may include people who have been hurt in some way but who are not themselves very good: "victims" of prison guard violence may not deserve it, but they are themselves criminals. Protestors who are beaten by police are often portrayed in this way, as having "asked for it." If bad things happen to bad people, we still feel they are bad people. The difference between CT and ACT may again be due to the former's focus on politics: to mobilize people in support of victims, they had better be morally admirable. Political organizers search for and help construct ideal—good—victims.

Unlike villains and heroes, victims are defined less by their goodness and more by their (lack of) power. Power is linked to activity as well as morality; of the 50 least powerful identities in the data set, only 11 had positive activity scores, and of these, only 5 were seen as more than slightly active (A = +1): baby, infant, crybaby, toddler, and alcoholic. Children largely fill the niche of powerless but active identities. There appear to be moral judgments here: of the 50 least powerful identities, only 5 had positive evaluation ratings (baby, shrimp, infant, toddler, and servant), and once again, only those marking childhood status (baby, infant, and toddler) had scores greater than 1, indicating more than slightly good. We do not just view the powerless as inactive, we see them as bad.[4] These nuances of low-power characters help explain mixed attitudes toward victims. We tend to pity them, but that pity can shade into contempt (Fiske 2012) to such an extent that they slide toward immorality. Victims are often viewed as deviant (Boyle 2017). We are

angry if we believe they could have done something to help themselves. If they could become survivors (a positive and powerful identity, E = +2.79 and P = +2.80, but not very active, A = +.66) or resisters, we would admire them (Whittier 2009).

Several discrepancies between CT and ACT—sleeping giants, active villains, the goodness of victims—reflect CT's interest in intentional character constructions in political arenas rather than in the general sentiments that the primary words arouse. This suggests work that could link ACT's general evaluations of words such as hero with the reputations of concrete actors in various institutional contexts: more attention to modifiers, more elaborate and substantive institutional filters, and recognition of the ways that groups and individuals use sentiments for their own purposes and often change them in doing so.

Mapping Interactions

By mapping common cultural knowledge about elements of social interactions, ACT can take the next step and predict what will happen in specific events; we not only have typical feelings toward each character, we also have consistent expectations about how they will interact with one another. CT suggests that heroes protect victims, villains attack, victims suffer, and minions make ineffectual threatening noises. Because they follow our expectations, these classic interactions are satisfying to watch, especially when the ultimate satisfaction is delayed by suspenseful plot twists. CT offers an analysis of the main character tropes—what do they look, sound, talk, and act like—that helps to explain the sentiments and deflections found for these identities in ACT.

Interact is a program that allows users to perform various tasks using EPA

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[4]The correlation between power and activity for identities was .36 ($p < .001$). There was no similar significant correlation between activity and evaluation ($r = .035$; ns; UGA 2015).

dictionaries and ACT equations, such as finding concepts that fit a particular range of EPA scores or analyzing events where selected identities engage in chosen behaviors. A user can input different identities and ask for appropriate behaviors that would occur given the roles entered. By entering the identities of villain, victim, and hero, we can predict what the expected behaviors might be in these encounters (using Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2015, sex-averaged scores, and male interactants in Interact). How should a hero behave toward a villain? The three most optimal (expected) acts are: sentence, incarcerate, and jail. And how should a villain behave toward a hero? The three most expected acts are: chatter to, josh, and hookup with— all fairly mild actions that underline ACT's focus on everyday engagements in contrast to CT's concern with political rhetoric. Next, we turn to victims; villains are expected to enslave, exterminate, or slay victims, while heroes are expected to mother, teach, or guard them. These interactions fit many narratives.

We can introduce peripheral actors to the story, like "sidekick" for heroes and "henchman" for villains. Heroes are expected to propose marriage to, liberate, or make love to their sidekicks, while villains frighten, scare, or freak out their henchmen. In response, the henchmen stammer at, idolize, and mimic villains, and sidekicks are expected to drink with, glance at, and ask about heroes. Some of these suggestions are humorous: a computer program makes these matches based only on the location of behaviors and identities in EPA space. There were many behaviors to choose from—over 800—with actions as diverse as dazzle, financially back, photograph, baptize, and fire from a job. With that in mind, it is almost uncanny how close many of these optimal acts come to familiar storylines. It suggests strong patterns

in how we make sense of our world; so strong that we can use such knowledge to predict how people expect events to unfold.

When a particular experience breaks from expectations, we feel deflection. ACT equations calculate how a fundamental impression changes in different situations, such as how much goodness a teacher might lose if she harms a child. Deflection is the sum of those squared differences between the original, fundamental sentiments and the new ones that emerge given the specifics of the situation (summed across the EPA dimensions). Higher deflection predicts more severe breaks from expectations and greater shock (and stress) in that what is happening is strange and unreal.

To show the range of deflection, Interact divides a graph into four segments, with the first indicating normal and expected events (deflection numbers at about 0–6), the second showing events that are unusual and unique (about 7–14), the third signaling unorthodox and weird events (15–22), and the fourth indicating events that seem impossible as originally conceived (23–30+; Heise 2013:26). When a villain harms a victim, this is expected, with an extremely low deflection value of 1.4. We might not like the harmful act, but this is how we expect villains to behave. Next, a hero helps a victim. Again, this normal act produces a low deflection score of 4.9. If we mix up the storyline and have the villain help the victim, this more than doubles the deflection to 12.6, making it unusual. Next, we try something truly unexpected and have the hero harm the victim: deflection is off the charts (literally, as the graph maxes out at 30) at 38.8. This is the impossible story. A hero engaging in this act is no hero. It is weird for the victim to harm the villain (deflection = 18.9) but impossible for the victim to harm the hero (deflection = 32.3). Each

character has its role, and deviations from the typical narratives quickly stray into strange, disturbing territory.

DISCUSSION

Character theory and affect control theory differ in ways that make them complementary. CT uses different sources of data, especially visual data; specializes in political interactions; and uses more interpretive and less formal theory. ACT provides comprehensive dictionaries of EPA profiles for hundreds of identities and uses formal models to make predictions. Together, they provide a wide-ranging picture of how people grapple with the identities and behaviors they see in both everyday life and the news headlines of politics.

Because CT emerged out of a cultural analysis of politics, in other words competitive arenas, it highlights conflict in the construction of identities. We have seen competitive victimology, but there is also competition over who is the hero and who the villain in a situation. One side's hero is the other's villain. Different sides in "culture wars" may agree on what a hero or a villain is but not who fits the bill. Some people may simultaneously be viewed as a hero and a villain, such as Edward Snowden, admired for revealing governmental surveillance practices while simultaneously castigated for sharing classified information. In 2008, some Americans admired McCain for his military valor; others admired Obama for the strength of his intellect—two kinds of heroes (Alexander 2010). CT points to the rhetorical needs of different elements of characterization and to how different players try to highlight one or another of them.

CT focuses on three identities out of the thousands in ACT. These three, CT claims, are the heart of political oratory, representing the reputations of the key

players that engage in strategic interaction with each other. Of the infinite number of possible interactions that ACT can model, a small number are common and important in social life, including those among the essential triad. This seems especially true in politics, where a small number of plots regarding fears and threats and their resolution recur frequently. CT was developed to understand how characters and their interactions can lead to political action and beliefs, and ACT's deflections are key to this process. Shuster and Campos-Castillo (2017) apply ACT to the ERA movement to find that framing strategies that portray events in a way that produces deflection may encourage people to engage in political behavior to prevent those outcomes. CT identifies pervasive narratives, and ACT can predict what happens when plots go unexpectedly off-track. In the political arena, such disrupted storylines may have influence on mobilization.

ACT has been applied to political settings (Britt and Heise 2000; Heise and Lerner 2006; Irwin 2003; Shuster and Campos-Castillo 2017), but we feel that it retains unfulfilled potential that CT may help unlock. Generally, different institutional contexts reward different formulations of character, especially the identities of collective players such as nations and organizations. Competitive environments presumably reward exaggerated threats of outgroups and exaggerated virtues of ingroup heroes and victims. Cooperative environments may favor downplaying the same traits. Many protest groups demand inclusion and respect, and as a result, intentionally challenge negative distortions of outgroups.

ACT's institutional filters acknowledge contextual differences like these but do not fully grasp how institutional arenas lead to the adaptation and sometimes changes in identities. Processes by which

sentiments are attacked, changed, and deployed may simply be exogenous to ACT, but further work is needed along this border. Examination of variance in EPA scores may suggest contentious identities. Another possibility is to collect data on the traits of raters pertaining to ideological or political divides, which is then integrated into a data set in the same way profiles can be separated by sex. Heise (1979) separated data along both sex and moderate/conservative dimensions, measuring conservatism with a 30-item ideological checklist. While this may be unnecessarily cumbersome for some ACT dictionaries, it could be advantageous for understanding contested identities with known partisan divisions or ideological splits. Political party identification has been shown to affect EPA ratings for at least some identities (Boyle and Meyer 2018).

By looking so closely at three identities, CT can distinguish different kinds of heroes, villains, and victims that are not obvious through ACT surveys. It should make a difference whether a hero's strength comes from physical force or analytic intelligence; whether a villain is a likeable scoundrel or truly evil. We saw that victims are fairly neutral on evaluation, but this may simply cover the fact that some victims are extremely sympathetic, such as infants or animals, while others are actually bad people. We wonder if there are other cases where a single word does not capture the complex sentiments people hold; some identities seem especially likely to hide complexities, as *victim* does. Many political identities may harbor this ambivalence: leaders, feminists, activists, politicians, and so on. CT suggests that the variance of different ACT identities can be probed to identify cases of disagreement and subtypes.

CT analyzes not simply the words representing characters, as ACT does, but also the images: the colors, size, gaze, posture, and gestures—all of which do some character work (Jasper et al. forthcoming). Would ACT results be the same if survey respondents reacted to images instead of words? This should be possible to test. In an age of extensive penetration by visual media, images play a large role in our lives. What is more, cognitive psychology has deployed images in research that is parallel to the impressions and sentiments of ACT. Fiske (2012), for example, has examined class, race, and gender stereotypes that largely correspond to ACT's evaluation and potency dimensions. This could inform the modifier inventories used in ACT, with the possibility of visual-based expansions.

Conflict over identities suggests how identities change over time. While fundamental sentiments are largely stable, particularly the evaluation dimension (Heise 2007), they can shift over time (MacKinnon and Luke 2002). Analysis of characters might point to arenas that could experience broader change in the future as cultural swings captured in narratives and other media could reflect shifts in the cultural assumptions underlying fundamental sentiments. For instance, Christie (1986) describes the "little old lady" as an ideal victim to garner sympathy and then points out that four hundred years ago, at the height of the witch hunts, this was hardly the case, where instead, little old ladies were imbued with power, especially in cases of birth, sickness, or death. The ideal victim today was once the ideal villain. Characters persist, even as their incorporation of specific identities changes.

Groups often mobilize to improve their positions in society: to gain status, political rights, economic resources, and institutional positions. Are they villains, victims, or heroes, with the political opportunities appropriate to each? CT describes the dilemmas and strategies

they use in their character work, such as portraying themselves as victims versus heroes (Whittier 2009). We can trace these strategies in EPA space: feminists aimed to portray women as stronger, the early civil rights movement wished to demonstrate the goodness of blacks, and many professions have advanced their interests by raising impressions on all three EPA dimensions. We lack the space to describe these strategies, but CT's findings in the political realm help explain how groups move intentionally across EPA space (although their efforts can fail, due to countermobilization). There are institutional, cultural, and political underpinnings to this character work.

CT's attention to audiences in arenas may help resolve some ambiguity in several ACT identities by pointing to strategic tradeoffs. We saw that victims score neutral or slightly negative on the evaluation dimension in ACT dictionaries. People can react with warm compassion for some victims (e.g., children killed by drunk drivers: Weed 1990) but blame and anger toward others (e.g., people on welfare or patients in a mental hospital: Lerner 1980), as occurs with the "just world" bias, where people may see victims of misfortune as less good or as deserving what happens to them. Such reactions often depend on the institutional context. Adult victims of child sexual abuse may be reduced to innocent, passive childlike victims on television shows, but they prefer to appear as strong survivors so that they can pursue political programs and recruit others (Whittier 2009). CT's focus on rhetoric helps make sense of some ACT results, suggesting that a single word may cover ambivalence or multiple identities.

Interactions among core characters can also resolve some of this ambiguity, for instance, when victims interact with villains and heroes. Here, the pressure is removed to blame victims because the story depends instead on blame and anger being focused squarely on the antagonist, the villain. And frustrations that victims are weak or not helping themselves are removed because again, the hero is expected to perform these roles and an empowered class of victims denies the hero that opportunity to show his or her mettle. Thus, victims enter a pure form, where they are neither expected to be heroes who save themselves or others by fighting back nor villains who brought calamity upon themselves and potentially others by association. The co-occurrence of multiple characters helps to parse out and strengthen the unique roles of each actor.

CONCLUSION

Understanding characters is not just an academic enterprise; it translates into real-world effects for those who adopt such personas. For instance, Summers-Effler (2010) in her ethnographic research comparing two social movement groups finds that adhering to the ideals of saints versus heroes had a cascade of effects for each group. Saints endure hardships with humility and joy. Heroes bravely fight against insurmountable odds, but in doing so, they must take on risks, identify opponents, and emerge victorious. This results in differences in tactics and goals for the groups. Saints and heroes experience different emotions and vulnerabilities. For the leaders, saints have to be more humble and closer to the divine than those around them, while heroes have to be braver and more powerful than those around them, affecting group dynamics.

One of the benefits of merging concepts from character theory and affect control theory is the ability to see the powerful applicability of both to concrete settings, and with character theory, particularly to the political realm. In this manner,

CT addresses an occasional critique of ACT that it is too abstract or that the equations of Interact and EPA profiles are too divorced from the complexities of the real world. To the contrary, such profiles emerge from centuries of meaning-making; they are firmly entrenched in the narratives that put children to sleep at night and entertain movie audiences. Linking character theory and affect control theory helps to make clear the grounding of ACT measures in cultural artifacts. And by connecting stock characters to fundamental sentiments, we shed light on the staying power and consensus that emerges around particular identities. In practice, ACT scholars could model nuances in characters by making greater use of elements already collected in many ACT dictionaries, such as settings or modifiers, to capture greater detail in the types of actors involved in interactions, as well as the arenas where these events unfold. ACT scholars could expand these dictionaries of settings and modifiers, using character and narrative theory to help identify new traits and places relevant for inclusion.

CT examines a tiny number of identities in the context of strategic settings in which players construct character tropes. Mostly these are political arenas, with clear stakes at risk in the character battles. This intentional character work can in turn influence basic ACT identities but even more, the connections between identities: what gender or ethnic group is eligible to be a hero, for instance, or a victim? By looking at this character work, it can also show the visual dimensions of different identities as well as a number of subtypes of each. Political and politicized identities may be especially vulnerable to change, including intentional change, and CT suggests ways this happens. Politics involves the deployment of material resources but also the mobilization of favorable

impressions, emotions, and moral sentiments. Politics is about the pursuit of power, but one central way to get power is to persuade others that you are competent, courageous, and benevolent while your opponents are none of these. Persuasion is at the heart of electoral politics, protest movements, even corporate marketing, with impression management as its goal. Perhaps more than ever in politics—in an era of formal democracies and the expanding reach of social media—groups and individuals battle over their reputations, over what others think and feel about them. Characters simplify complex people and issues, a core component of stories and images that suggest the need for action.

Character theory and affect control theory rely on different sources of evidence about characters, especially public texts and images on the one hand and surveys and experiments on the other. This difference is widespread, as cultural sociologies and social psychologies have in many cases asked parallel questions with little cross-fertilization (Jasper 2017). We hope to have shown that the concerns of each can be translated, at least, into the language of the other, allowing insights and tests not otherwise obvious from within each tradition. How cultural meanings reverberate, spread, and move people is a big subject for which we need research and theory from all available subdisciplines.

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