

“Country Music, Openness to Experience, and the Psychology of Culture War” by Will Wilkinson

In the car, I listen to country music. Country has an ideology. Not to say country has a position on abortion, exactly. But country music, taken as a whole, has a position on life, taken as a whole. Small towns. Dirt roads. Love at first sight. Hot-blooded kids havin' a good ol' time. Gettin' hitched. America! Raisin' up ruddy-cheeked scamps who you will surely one day worry are having too good a hot-blooded time. Showing up for Church. Venturing confused into the big wide world only to come back to Alabama forever since there ain't a damn single thing out there in the Orient or Paris, France what compares to that spot by the river under the trembling willows where first you kissed the girl you've known in your heart since second grade is the only girl you would ever truly love. Fishin'! How grandpa, who fought in two wars, worked three jobs, raised four kids, and never once complained, can't hardly wait to join grandma up in heaven, cuz life just ain't no good without her delicious pies.

Last night, on my way to fetch bok choy, I heard Collin Raye's classic "One Boy, One Girl," a song that takes the already suffocating sentimentality of the FM-country weltanschauung and turns it up to fourteen. The overwhelming force of this song's manufactured emotion led me unexpectedly to a conjecture about conservative psychology and the stakes of the "culture wars."

Now, conservatives and liberals really do differ psychologically. Allow me to drop some science:

Applying a theory of ideology as motivated social cognition and a 'Big Five' framework, we find that two traits, Openness to New Experiences and Conscientiousness, parsimoniously capture many of the ways in which individual differences underlying political orientation have been conceptualized. . . .

We obtained consistent and converging evidence that personality differences between liberals and conservatives are robust, replicable, and behaviorally significant, especially with respect to social (vs. economic) dimensions of ideology. In general, liberals are more open-minded, creative, curious, and novelty seeking, whereas conservatives are more orderly, conventional, and better organized. (Carney et al. 807)

Full disclosure: I score very high in "openness to experience" and worryingly low in "conscientiousness". (When I was first diagnosed with ADD my very concerned psychiatrist asked "Do you have a hard time keeping jobs?") This predicts that I'm extremely liberal, that my desk is a total mess, and that my bedroom is cluttered with books, art supplies, and "cultural memorabilia." It's all true.

Is country music really conservative music? It's obvious if you listen to it, but here are a couple telling tables from Peter Rentfrow and Samuel Gosling's fascinating paper "The Do Re Mi's of Everyday Life: The Structure and Personality Correlates of Music Preferences" helps identify country as the most "upbeat and conventional" genre of music. A preference for "upbeat and conventional" music is negatively correlated with "openness" and positively correlated with "conscientiousness," and so, as you would then expect, self-described conservatives tend to like "upbeat and conventional" music (more than any other kind), while self-described liberals tend to like everything else better.

Again, those low in "openness" are less likely to visit other countries, try new kinds of food, take drugs, or buck conventional norms generally. This would suggest that most conservatives aren't going to seek and find much intense and meaningful emotion in exotic travel, hallucinogenic ecstasy, sexual experimentation, or challenging aesthetic experience. The emotional highlights of the low-openness life are going to be the type celebrated in "One Boy, One Girl": the moment of falling in love with "the one," the wedding day, the birth one's children (though I guess the song is about a surprising ultrasound). More generally, country music comes again and again to the marvel of advancing through life's stations, and finds delight in experiencing traditional familial and social relationships from both sides. Once I was a girl with a mother, now I'm a mother with a girl. My parents took care of me, and now I take care of them. I was once a teenage boy threatened by a girl's gun-loving father, now I'm a gun-loving father threatening my girl's teenage boy. Etc. And country is full of assurances that the pleasures of simple, rooted, small-town, lives of faith are deeper and more abiding than the alternatives.

My conjecture, then, is that country music functions in part to reinforce in low-openness individuals the idea that life's most powerful, meaningful emotional experiences are precisely those to which conservative personalities living conventional lives are most likely to have access. And it functions as a device to coordinate members of conservative-minded communities on the incomparable emotional weight of traditional milestone experiences.

Yesterday's Washington Post features a classic "conservatives in the mist" piece on the conservative denizens of Washington, OK, and their sense that their values are under attack. Consider this passage about fellow named Mark Tague:

"I want my kids to grow up with values and ways of life that I had and my parents had," he says, so his youngest son tools around the garage on a Big Wheel, and his oldest daughter keeps her riding horse at the family barn built in 1907, and they buy their drinking milk from Braun's because he always has. "Why look for change?" he says. "I like to know that what you see is what you get." (Saslow)

Country music is for this guy.

But why would you want your kids to grow up with the same way of life as you and your grandparents? My best guess (and let me stress guess) is that those low in openness depend emotionally on a sense of enchantment of the everyday and the profundity of ritual. Even a little change, like your kids playing with different toys than you did, comes as a small reminder of the instability of life over generations and the contingency of our emotional attachments. This is a reminder low-openness conservatives would prefer to avoid, if possible. What high-openness liberals feel as mere nostalgia, low-openness conservatives feel as the baseline emotional tone of a recognizably decent life. If your kids don't experience the same meaningful things in the same way that you experienced them, then it may seem that their lives will be deprived of meaning, which would be tragic. And even if you're able to see that your kids will find plenty of meaning, but in different things and in different ways, you might well worry about the possibility of ever really understanding and relating to them. The inability to bond over profound common experience would itself constitute a grave loss of meaning for both generations. So when the culture redefines a major life milestone, such as marriage, it trivializes one's own milestone experience by imbuing it with a sense of contingency, threatens to deprive one's children of the

same experience, and thus threatens to make the generations strangers to one another. And what kind of monster would want that?

Country music is a bulwark against cultural change, a reminder that "what you see is what you get," a means of keeping the charge of enchantment in "the little things" that make up the texture of the every day, and a way of literally broadcasting the emotional and cultural centrality of the conventional big-ticket experiences that make a life a life.

A lot of country music these days is culture war, but it's more bomb shelter than bomb.