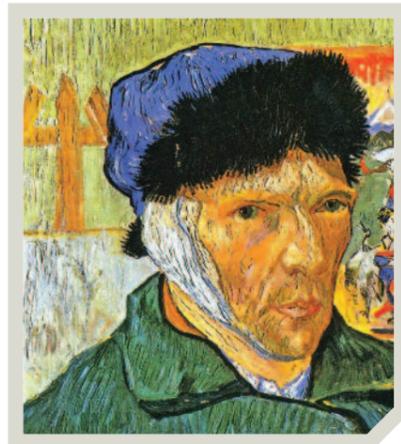


Behind the masks

William Todd Schultz offers a psychobiography primer

Psychobiography is a lumpy, too rarefied term for what we all do, every day, experts and non-experts alike: interpret and try to understand other people. There's nothing particularly fancy about it. Probably 50 per cent of our waking and 80 per cent of our insomniac life is spent dissecting soft collisions with friends, lovers, co-workers and strangers. We can't not do it. Even split-brain subjects, when they see their left hand choose an object as directed by a walled-off, independent right hemisphere, confabulate. That is, they make up a story, despite the fact that they have no clue what is going on. You'd think they might say, 'How do I know why my left hand did that? I'm a split brain subject!' But they don't. They narrate. They interpret.

Psychobiography is a kind of extra explicit form of biography. Any biography (if successful and meaningful) has to provide a suitably complex, convincing portrait of an individual's inner life, what makes a person tick, what they are after, why they do what they do, why they succeed or fail. You come away from the best biographies feeling like you know the person better, feeling as if a lot has



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been explained. But in biography, psychology stays off-stage. It's invisible. The device is never bared. It's there; you just don't see it. Psychobiography bares the device. It's a way of doing psychology. Scientific findings and personality research concepts are gathered up, highlighted, placed in turbulent context, then aimed at a person in order to illuminate. The psychology in psychobiography is a sort of flashlight. Ideally, it allows you to see what was in the dark before. The goal, usually, is to get at the *why* – hidden patterns, scripts, motives, needs, conflicts, desires.

Strictly speaking, psychobiography is applied psychology. It tests the usefulness of personality science by seeing what it can accomplish when focused on the lives of real persons. A lot of psychologists don't deal much with real persons, funnily enough. They study processes, mechanisms, brain functions, attitudes. They feel that is enough – knowledge for knowledge's sake. I don't disagree, not entirely. I just feel, as do most psychobiographers, that the individual level of analysis is as worthy of attention as the universal or the group levels. It's

often left out of the picture (as if it's none of our business). But isn't our final aim to understand people? If so, we need to try it out occasionally, don't we?

It's here that method-centred psychologists ask, 'But isn't psychobiography rather too subjective, too interpretive?' The key word is 'too'. Subjectivity is spread all over experimental psychology, so the contrast is a bit specious. Results of experiments need to be interpreted. Meaning isn't self-evident. Even reviews of literature are fraught with judgement, opinion, bias. Psychobiography can itself be done relatively quantitatively, via assorted forms of content analysis. It's uncommon, but not impossible. The best example is Tim Kasser's brilliant book *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon* (OUP, 2013) on why John Lennon wrote 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'.

Whatever the case, I think it's safe to say that the most thoughtful and reasonable psychologists espouse methodological pluralism or what Robert Sternberg calls 'converging operations', a judicious mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, at least when called for. Even the hardcore trait psychologists McCrae and Costa offer the following open-minded observation: 'Scientific study does not necessarily imply experimentation. Science proceeds by many methods and works best when the method is dictated by the nature of the problem rather than academic fashion and prestige.' Maslow called this being problem-centred; he contrasted it with means-centredness. In psychobiography, the 'problem', so to speak, is the individual case.

There are two particular misconceptions about psychobiography that call for clarification. The first is the notion – in my experience, relatively common – that psychobiographers aim to diagnose subjects with some sort of DSM-derived mental disorder. Even Freud opposed this adamantly. He called such a process 'pathography', and regarded it as virtually worthless. I agree. Diagnoses are names – at best simplified descriptions, at worst distortions of complex emotional and behavioural strategies. Let's say the question is, Why did Van Gogh cut off his left earlobe? (By the way, in paintings it's the right earlobe, but that's because the artist used a mirror for self-portraits). Then let's say the answer is, Because he was psychotic. Psychosis, of course, is just a label for a mental state. It's purely, and only ever, descriptive. It can't explain why Van Gogh (a) cut off the earlobe, and not something else; (b) performed the action around Christmas-time; (c) gave

the flesh to a prostitute named Rachel; or (d) told her to 'Keep this object carefully.' Really, to say Van Gogh cut off his earlobe because he was psychotic is no different than saying 'I don't know why Van Gogh cut off his earlobe.' The clearest sign of a bad psychobiography is pathography. It's fallacious. The label itself needs to be explained.

Too many people also mistakenly believe psychobiography is intrinsically reductionist, that its explanations take the form of an inverted pyramid, with a host of behaviours traced back to one, and only one, initiating event or circumstance. Pathography, for instance, would be reductionist, in that it gathers up feelings and thoughts and actions and assumes each to be caused by a single mental illness (say, bipolar disorder). Long ago I came upon an essay advancing the farcically simple-minded argument that Sylvia Plath's poetry – across years, across themes, across clusters – was a function of patterns of menstruation. This is *prima facie* nonsense. (It turns out men endorse 'symptoms' of premenstrual dysphoric disorder just as frequently as do women.) It's also reductionist. The truth is, good psychobiographers begin by expecting that everything we do is overdetermined. The search is for clusters of motives, not one. Back to Van Gogh. He likely cut off his earlobe for several reasons, did so at Christmas-time for several reasons, gave it to Rachel for several reasons.

Overdetermination is reductionism's antidote. There are always multiple causes in play, some conscious, most probably unconscious.

So, that's a bit about what psychobiography is and isn't or shouldn't be. Another question that comes up a lot is how it is done. How does one write a psychobiography? What's the formula?

There isn't one, really. The formula depends on the question and, sometimes, on the person being analysed, the medium. I write about artists, and they come with their own sets of challenges, but if the subject is, say, Clinton or Trump, or Freud or Jung, the challenges are different, in some ways less surmountable even, since politicians (for instance) lie, or they say what they say not because they believe it, but in order to get people to vote for them.

Like all my friends, I've been thinking a lot about David Bowie recently, and what his music meant to me. If I were to write a Bowie psychobiography, what would I do? How would I start?

I always begin with the art. You have to try to know it better than almost anyone alive. There has to be a complete immersion. The art is self-expression. It's

data, raw material, it's the thing to be explained (via overdetermination). The art is nicely heterogeneous, especially in a person like Bowie. It defies simplistic generalisations, and that's good. At this stage, you want to stay open to all possibilities. I don't usually start with the life because there's a tendency then to overprivilege particular happenings or events. You get seduced by the vivid instance – say, Bowie being punched in the eye as an adolescent, or the basically boring question of Bowie's sexuality.

Slowly what you begin to do – and this can be shown to be valid, it's not imaginary – is see in the art assorted patterns and themes, repetitions. Bowie writes several songs in which he's an alien. He makes three records that together comprise the Berlin Trilogy, just as Sylvia Plath composed a set of poems called the Bee Sequence. The art yields saliences – elements that stand out, that draw attention to themselves. Artists have obsessions. They need obsessions. What you try doing is noticing them; you are a kind of obsession collector.

Then, always, the question becomes *why*? To get at sets of whys you superimpose the life over the art. The art is the life, of course, or part of the life at least, so the two domains are reciprocally illuminating. If I read Kafka's *The Judgment* – in which a father sentences a son to death by drowning, and the son promptly drowns himself – I begin to suspect serious father conflicts. Then I read Kafka's *Letter to His Father*, and these suspicions are confirmed tenfold. In the letter, Kafka repeatedly compares himself to vermin. This fact compels a return to the art – specifically, *The Metamorphosis*. It's a constant, iterative back and forth as ideas take shape, some promising, some not.

You always want to pay attention to what the artist says about his art too, not because it's the final word – it isn't; artists can be wrong about their motives – but because it's more material, more evidence. As I listened to Bowie records over the last month or so, I also watched quite a few interviews. In one from 1979 he says this: 'Thematically, I've always dealt with isolation in everything I've written. It's something that triggers me off, if it has to do with alienation or isolation. So, I have

Meet the author

'I first got interested in psychobiography out of a dissatisfaction with the traditional experimental paradigm, in which variables were valued far above real living persons. I quickly saw psychobiography as antidotal, a cure for mindless method-fixation in psychology. Looked at this way, psychobiography is a sort of "return of the repressed". It reminds psychology what it ought to be about every now and then: using variables derived from studies in a way that allows us to understand actual people. Experimental findings can be exciting – and psychology is a science, first and foremost – but the individual needs to be accounted for too (or that's what I think, at least). As Henry Murray put it, we are all like all other people, some other people, and no other people. Psychobiography's task, then, is to zero in on uniqueness. It fills a yawning void.'

My most recent book is a biography (not a psychobiography) of musician Elliott Smith, and I have written two full-length psychobiographies, on Truman Capote and Diane Arbus. In 2005 I edited the *Handbook of Psychobiography* (Oxford). I curate and edit the Oxford series "Inner Lives".



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often put myself in circumstances or situations in which I'm isolated so I can write about them.' Even his paintings, which at the time he was too uncertain about to show, he describes as 'all people in isolation', and all, in some ways, him. LA comes up, a place he says he detests. He goes there nonetheless, precisely to feel isolated, to feel, as it were, inspired. Years later, in 2002, Bowie repeats similar sentiments: 'As I get older my questions are fewer, but I ask them, I bark them, more... I've consistently written about the same subjects, nearly 35, nearly 40 years. There's really been no change with me. It's all despondency, despair, fear, isolation.' The interviewer interjects, 'What about spaceships?' Bowie replies, 'It's an interior dialogue that you manifest physically. It's my inner space writ large.'

Here, Bowie tells us about his obsession – isolation. It's what triggers him. It has something to do with the spaceman theme. It's the feeling of his inner life that he translates symbolically. You look for patterns in the art; you look for patterns in what the artist says about the art; and sometimes, the obsessions line up perfectly. Lennon was obsessed

Recommended reading

- Alan C. Elms (1994). *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- William Todd Schultz (2005). *Handbook of Psychobiography*. Oxford University Press.
- Dan P. McAdams (2011). *George W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream: A Psychological Portrait*. Oxford University Press.
- William Todd Schultz (2011). *Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote Answered Prayers*. Oxford University Press.
- William Todd Schultz (2011). *An Emergency in Slow Motion: The Inner Life of Diane Arbus*. Bloomsbury.
- Kasser, T. (2013). *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*. Oxford University Press.
- Kyle Arnold (2016). *The Divine Madness of Philip K. Dick*. Oxford University Press.

with the image of an enigmatic female in the sky; he imagined her coming down some day to save him. Many of his songs – too many to name – feature mysterious, unreachable women. The best example is 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'. He keeps running into her; she shows up unexpectedly; but they never really connect, he never really reaches her.

Since psychobiography is a way of doing psychology, there are always questions having to do with theory. I'm no fan of brainless Freud bashing. In fact, what I'm a fan of is Freud. I've loved Freud since college. But personality science has progressed far beyond psychoanalysis, and psychobiographers need to reckon with that fact, and make use of ideas that are not only newer, but more scientifically sound. A psychobiography is only as solid as the theory it rests on, obviously. Bad theory, bad psychobiography.

Dan McAdams recommends that we assess people from the vantage point of three independent levels: traits, characteristic adaptations and stories. This makes sense. We are born with basic endogenous tendencies, traits like extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience; all abstract potentials that incline us towards action. We also evolve habitual, strategic patterns of response – attachment styles, defence mechanisms, forms of coping. Then finally, we narrate it all, tell stories about it, construct theories of self that are organising and self-fulfilling. Silvan Tomkins called these stories 'scripts'. They allow us to interpret what we do. One might fabricate victim scripts, redemption scripts, contamination scripts, addiction scripts – the list of possibilities is endless.

Take Bowie, for instance. What traits are prominent? Certainly openness. Those high in openness are insatiably curious; they have an intense desire to learn, to know. They prefer nuance, complexity, ambiguity, mystery, questions over answers. (Openness correlates with intelligence.) Their range of feelings is wider; they repress less. They believe in magic and ESP and past-lives. They are original, creative, artistic; they are even more creatively productive. They get bored easily; as soon as they master something, what they want to do is extend it, remake it, reinvent it, or move on to different projects altogether. Behaviourally, openness correlates with sensation-seeking, according to research. Open people are experience-seeking, thrill- and adventure-seeking, disinhibited, sexually adventurous. They do more drugs as a way of expanding



David Bowie spoke of becoming a new kind of rock star; he wanted to use rock to explore ideas he had about identity and fabrication (Image from David Bowie Impressions exhibition, Berlin)

their minds, raising their consciousness. They also tend to be politically liberal or radical.

Bowie was all these things. He's flamingly high 'O'. He was disarmingly smart, famously well read. His influences, as he described them, extend endlessly, to mime, Kabuki theatre and beyond. He adopted personas, then discarded them – Ziggy, the Thin White Duke. Creatively, he was restless. He acted, he sang, he wrote, he produced, he painted. He spoke of becoming a new kind of rock star; he wanted to use rock to explore ideas he had about identity and fabrication. He played as Ziggy or the Thin White Duke, then he gave interviews in character. It was real and it was an act at the same time. He enjoyed being someone else, he said. His sexuality is a complex subject, but most of the time, in most interviews, he admits to being bisexual. In the least, he was sexually experimental. His styles were all over the map – pop, rock, ambient, folk, soul – he tried it all. Drugs were a problem too, for a time, until he stopped altogether.

Traits are descriptions, individual-difference variables. They are best thought of as a first-read on a person, a conversation starter. They don't get at motives; they don't get at the why. For that, it's necessary to turn to McAdams's level two, which is all about goals, strategies, coping mechanisms, relationship styles. Level two zeroes in on what you want, and how you go about getting it, or how you manage to avoid what you don't want.

I am not a Bowie expert, so I can't satisfactorily answer any of the following

questions; but here are level two-type queries. What were Bowie's obsessions and how did he engage them, express them? How did he cope with failure, personal or professional? How did he deal with turbulent, negative feelings? What was the function of his art, what did he get out of it? Did he desire achievement, intimacy, power? How did he feel around people, intimates or strangers? Was he comfortable, anxious, avoidant? What about 'conditional patterns'? That is, which sorts of situations led him to act out of character? In what ways did the setting he was in impact how he felt or behaved? What was he afraid of, and how did he contend with the fear? What brought him the most joy? Was he mostly happy, or mostly sad?

Level three is the narrative level, *post-hoc* constructions in story form of what we have watched ourselves say or do or feel or think. The question here is what Bowie said about his experiences, which he singled out or somehow emphasised or told about over and over as he put together a theory of self. Maybe the time he got punched in the eye is one, but there would be dozens of others. Each single, discrete, affect-laden happening is a 'scene'. Most scenes are quickly disposed of; they don't amount to much. Others persist, in memory or as guides to future actions. What we do is script sets of similar scenes, we bundle them in clusters. Any life will contain thousands of individual scenes, but scripts are fewer in number, by definition.

One script Bowie seemed to employ was the 'alien script'. He saw himself as a rebel, an outsider, a freak, isolated in his

oddness, his refusal to simplify, to foreclose on one durable, unmistakable identity. No one seemed ever to know who he was. He was a shape-shifter, not of this world. 'He'd like to come and meet us, but he thinks he'd blow our mind.' He's unreachable, unknowable. The

Starman waits in the sky.

The above is a kind of outline. It is not, obviously, a psychobiography; it's more a proposal for a psychobiography. Much would need to be filled in – facts presented, interpretations advanced cogently. But it gives a small taste for the enterprise, the kinds of questions asked, and an *a priori* template to follow, guided by findings from personality science.

There's been progress in the field of psychobiography over the last 25 years or so. Bad psychobiographies still get written – I've read some, by accident. But the presence of bad psychobiography says nothing about the field's possibilities, just as bad dentists don't prove dentistry to be bankrupt. What's needed is not less psychobiography, but more, and better. It's a scientifically informed art. It's also, in some ways, psychology's stiffest challenge: how to make effective sense of one messy, confusing, contradictory and always fundamentally mysterious life. I think psychology ought to show, every now and then, that it can shed light on the most moving target there is – a person. Psychobiography is one way of doing that.

Confirmatory bias?

What about the possibility that psychobiographers simply privilege evidence that fits particular pet theories? That's unlikely. In most cases, especially those involving famous artists or historical figures, the evidence is there for all to see. It's part of the record. It exists in super-abundance. It's publicly available in the form of biographies, letters, journals, and so on. So, if a psychobiographer – or a biographer, for that matter – were to simply omit or overlook data that didn't fit with what they had in mind, they would assuredly be found out eventually, if not instantly, and shown to be careless or, worse, intellectually dishonest. This is where psychobiography differs from clinical case study. The Plaths and Van Goghs of the world are written about endlessly; they exist in a climate of opinion. It is possible to know their 'story'. Subjects of case studies, however, tend to be anonymous for various reasons, some legal. So interpretations *cannot* be checked against evidence. Doing so is impossible almost by definition. Not so for psychobiography.