The Wiley Handbook of Genius

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The Psychobiography of Genius

William Todd Schultz

Introduction

Psychobiography is a sometimes confusing, possibly even misleading name for a most commonplace endeavor – the attempt to understand people through the use of psychological concepts. It is what everybody does, less officially, every single day. Relying on whatever psychological or folk-psychological knowledge we happen to possess, we try figuring out why people do what they do, or feel what they feel, or think what they think. It is difficult to judge, but perhaps 50% of our waking, maybe more of our insomniac, time is spent in a mode of assessment. There is nothing exotic about it. We do it to survive.

As a research endeavor taken up mostly by personality psychologists, psychobiography proceeds similarly, from the same impulse, although more thoughtfully, planfully, and explicitly. Biographical evidence is carefully and thoroughly presented; key scenes or moments in a life are identified; theories are laid out as necessary; and some facet of a person's inner world is illuminated. It makes no difference whether the individual in question is a genius, by some measure, or a person quite a bit less exalted. The goal is to shed light on motives, emotional dynamics, relational strategies, or unconscious gestalts of thought and feeling, on the inner, subjective origins – often obscure to creators themselves – of publicly shared products or life events. One now classic essay by Runyan (2005), for instance, pursued the question of why Van Gogh cut off his ear. It is prototypical. The focus is precise; the question is clear and limited; and various possible explanatory vectors are presented then rigorously critiqued. Some get discarded as flawed or implausible or absurd (e.g., ear as phallic object), others retained.

Most typically, psychological science sets its sights on either group or universal levels of explanation, the individual person a relatively rare afterthought, a presumed sum total – somewhere far down the line – of part processes thrown in a blender. At the group level, one might investigate hippocampal tissue densities in schizophrenics, or mortality salience and low tolerance for ambiguity in political conservatives; at the universal, the effects of priming on emotion and behavior, or how the use of personal pronouns correlates with specific aspects of self-experience. As its name suggests, psychobiography works at the level of the individual. That this should be, in whatever way, the least bit controversial is a perplexity. The history of psychology, in some respects its grandest moments, is replete with $N = 1$ studies, and not around the fringes, either. James, Jung, Freud, Watson, Piaget, Skinner, Maslow, Tomkins, Klein,

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Laing – the list is long – all saw excellent reason to stop, from time to time, and see how theory works, or doesn't, in the lives of single subjects. The impulse, in other words, has been to *include*, not exclude, that particular level of analysis. One gets the sense, in reading these writers, that doing so was perfectly natural, an obvious step. This is what psychobiography almost uniquely contributes – it gathers up nomothetic findings, then aims them at real, complex, lived lives. It can be, in some ways, a test. Will these findings illuminate something actual? Will they tell us things about a person we would not otherwise know? Do they reveal? Do they prove their usefulness? At its essence, then, psychobiography is applied psychology. It is practical, single-subject level action research.

In most instances, psychobiography would not concern itself with the mechanics or cognitive operations of genius, what makes the thinking of a genius essentially anomalous. It can do this, it can focus on "part-processes," yet, speaking simply statistically, that avenue is uncommon. Instead, the focus tends to be on genius's *products* – their sources in the mind, personality, and emotional life of the person in question. In that sense, psychobiography is always about the *why* question – or at least almost always – not about the *how* question. The focus, then, is not so much on difference as on sameness (or, to be clearer, a special sort of sameness rooted in individuality). What I mean is this: Though the results of genius are astonishingly *sui generis*, they derive from the same sets of needs as do the works or products of nongenuises. Diane Arbus took pictures that recapitulated early family conflicts revolving around attachment insecurity (Schultz, 2011a); musician Elliott Smith wrote certain songs in order to dispatch feelings about a stepfather (Schultz, 2013); Truman Capote, in his final book *Answered Prayers*, made use of relational strategies predisposing preemptive abandonment (Schultz, 2011b); Elvis Presley had an oddly difficult time performing the song "Are You Lonesome Tonight" because it activated childhood anxieties centering on rejection and control (Elms & Heller, 2005); Wittgenstein, in his philosophizing about death and what can and can't be said, drew on his own death and suicide fears, the latter particularly demonic (Schultz, 1999). So, it isn't as if the psychobiography of genius unpacks categorically exotic *whys*. The motives behind genius's workings are readily recognizable. What is not as readily recognizable is the yield, what the workings lead to. Again, the distinction is between process and product. The former can be mundane – emotionally, that is – the latter uncanny. In fact, it is always interesting how uncanniness – say, Picasso's cubism – can erupt out of utter mundanity of motive.

On the matter of method, it's difficult to be generic. Except in an iterative, limited form, the familiar model of hypothesis testing is impractical if not impossible. There is no control group. Data are filtered, scrutinized, singled out, interpreted, by way of a process it would not do to call anything but subjective. Is psychobiography more art than science? One's instinct is to say yes, it is, although here again, in rarer instances, psychobiography can be, and has been, done purely scientifically through the use of, say, content-analytic strategies (more on that soon). Also, method can be a function of medium. Assaying Pollock's drip painting or Bach's sonatas suggests approaches less suited for an examination of Philip Larkin's poetry. How to best go about explaining has a lot to do with what's being explained.

In any case, over the past 20 years or so, various attempts have been made to be helpfully programmatic. As for working with biographical material – which always seems to exist in exhausting superabundance – the late Irving Alexander (1990) assembled what he calls "primary textual indicators of psychological saliency," a set of broad

hints or pointers signaling emotional density or significance. These have been used in quite a number of psychobiographical investigations; they amount to a winnowing device, a way of reducing the signal-to-noise ratio. He includes, for instance, primacy (what comes first in a text), frequency (simple repetitions), emphasis (the italicizing of an event), omission (leaving facts out tendentiously), and error (making notable mistakes in storytelling), among other possible cues. Keeping such pointers in mind facilitates data examination; from there, one extracts patterns within events that have been singled out, dynamics that persist and appear to be especially organizing for the person.

McAdams (1993) took a similar approach. His recommendation was to zero in on "nuclear episodes," including peak experiences, nadirs (low points), turning points, as well as earliest and key childhood, adolescent, and adult memories. One might also, McAdams said, explore themes of agency or communion as a way of getting at style of personality, or analyze characters in life stories – McAdams called them, after Jung, "imagos." Some imagos, the "warrior," for instance, express agentic tendencies; others, such as "the lover," point to communion needs.

More recently Alan Elms (2007) laid out an unusually specific step-by-step guide to psychobiographical process. He started with selection of subject, in the process warning against "idealizing or demonizing," and staying alert to personal biases. Next comes data collection, ideally from "varied sources," followed by the formulation and revision of tentative hypotheses. "It may be worth pausing to consider [at this point]," Elms wrote,

> whether the usual Freudian suspects are at work: Oedipal feelings, oral or anal personality traits, unconscious defenses, and so on. But there are plenty of non-Freudian possibilities as well: Eriksonian issues of identity, intimacy, generativity; the patterns of motivation first named by Murray and explored by McClelland, Winter, and others, such as achievement, affiliation, and power; such empirically derived constructs as authoritarianism and Machiavellianism; personality patterns based on early attachment experiences; the basic emotional scripts described by Tomkins and Carlson; even those five factors so popular in recent personality assessment literature, repetitively but sometimes usefully skimming the surface of personality rather than its depths.

After this, one returns, Elms suggests, to increasingly focused data collection, along with the task of dealing with discrepancies across data sources. Finally, one identifies and delimits valid conclusions, and compares these to other, potentially competing, interpretations.

Whatever the mechanics of method, one often begins with a simple question – psychologically promising and nonobvious. This question does not come prepackaged or a priori. It erupts out of data, out of some initial, curiosity-driven loitering around in the life in question. Let's return to Elvis, for a moment, an essay by Elms and Heller (2005). First, they discerned a trend. Elvis showed a puzzling tendency. In a large number of performances of the song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" he sabotaged the tune (an example of Alexander's "error" indicator). He made off-color jokes. He skipped lines or whole sections. He sang it alongside a mocking sidekick band member. Certain lines on certain nights reduced him to tears. The song, it seemed, was a packed conditioned stimulus. It elicited unexpected emotion. It got under Elvis's skin. What, as written, ought to have been a pained, poignant study of love loss morphed into a

burlesque. This is often the moment psychobiography begins, provoked by perplexity. One faces a psychological riddle of Rumpelstiltskin-like proportions. The obvious question is why – why did Elvis do this, why torpedo a touchy-feely love song? From there the process unfolds exactly as Elms (2007) described – theorizing, immersion in the life, the art; more theorizing; more immersion; then a piecemeal, back-and-forth meaning-making geared towards illuminating the sources of the initially uncanny.

In what follows, the plan is to proceed by example, working from recent examplars. I want to talk about method not abstractly, but by showing what has been done methodologically in psychobiographies I find particularly effective. For decades, psychobiography was a marginalized endeavor within the personality science orbit. Now, it would be harder to arrive at the same judgment. A comprehensive handbook appeared in 2005 (Schultz, 2005), replete with prescriptive and proscriptive guidelines as well as more than a dozen analyses of lives from Plath to Bin Laden. The tired misapprehension that the enterprise is (1) inherently flawed, (2) inevitably Freudian, and (3) preternaturally concerned only with diagnosis has been, one hopefully surmises, rebutted decisively. Oxford now publishes an "Inner Lives" Series, each volume a detailed psychological study of a compelling historical figure. Three titles have appeared so far: McAdams's (2010) assessment of George W. Bush and his decision to invade Iraq; my own psychobiographical take on Truman Capote (Schultz, 2011b), specifically his attempt to write the roman a clef *Answered Prayers*; and Kasser's (2013) investigation of the subjective sources of John Lennon's song "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds." Lennon and Capote famously called themselves geniuses, itself a nervy proclamation. Bush preferred the perhaps more manly "decider" sobriquet, and though he may seem outlandishly out of place in a genius handbook like this one, McAdams's way of going about making sense of his political life most certainly is not. In any event, these three efforts – on Bush, Lennon, and Capote – a politician, a musician, and a writer, recommend themselves as promising current how-tos. Each is laid out in subsequent sections, with an eye towards exploring methodological and theoretical steps in the process. In the end, assorted lessons will be presented as guides to future inquiry.

George W. Bush

In some ways, beginning here is a challenge. Political psychobiography throws down methodological oil slicks one rarely feels a need to side-step in studies of artists, for one inescapable reason: Most if not all politicians systematically lie. Their lives are press releases (Wiersma, 1988). They habitually say not what they believe but what they think, based on what advisors tell them, will work effectively politically. Art is self-expression of the highest order. Politics may be too, but getting at patterns of emotion, thought, and personality dynamics behind any one political decision requires an above average clearing away of clotted, orchestrated subterfuge. When are politicians most themselves? While giving a convention speech? Hardly. While delivering a state-of-the-union address? Not really. In writing, or sort of writing, with ghostwriters, a smokescreen autobiography? Probably not. In responding to increasingly less common press conference questions? Possibly. The hard fact is that of all psychological subjects, politicians are the most scripted, the most guarded. They say what polling or interest groups suggest. They are impression-managers, confederacies of filtered sound-bites. That said, it wouldn't be notably silly to call political psychobiography impossible.

One feels tempted. The case can be made (though certain excellent researchers like David Winter would no doubt strongly disagree).

Now and then, someone manages by chance to *get in*, as did Doris Kearns Goodwin for her book on Lyndon Johnson (Goodwin, 1991). But "near distance" access like that can't be counted on; it's likely a thing of the past anyway. Therefore, even though these can themselves occasionally turn problematic, the place to begin is with what non-Nietzscheans lazily call the facts. They do exist. They might be finessed and nuanced later (though Bush himself did not "do nuance"), but they possess an originally untrammeled character. They are what they are, and they can, with appropriate skepticism, be known. For instance, the death of Bush's sister, Robin; the fact that, to a stunning degree of exactitude, he followed the path of his father; or that he stopped drinking; or that (he says, at least) he found religion; or that, as many remarked of him as far back as his college days, he tended to be disarmingly charming, direct, in your face. Psychologist McAdams is, to many, the most astute personality sifter going, and he treats these facts as portals. Psychobiography is judicious, careful, deeply thought-through inference. The facts of a life point to destinations, like signposts on a freeway. Or in more modern terms, the facts are a GPS system, each one suggesting a step that suggests another, then another. At any point, one can branch off. If one doesn't find the path effective, one can also reroute the system. There is, moreover, always the prospect of getting lost if attention lapses, or ending up somewhere totally unexpected.

If explanation entails the application of a series of arrowed vectors, some context-contingent, some relatively durable, impervious to context, then facts are the first jigsaw pieces one anchors a puzzle around until, fragment by fragment, a recognizable image appears. Take the "I don't do nuance" and the "decider" details. Perhaps Bush is lying; perhaps he *does* do nuance. Here, those odds are low, since others who worked with him have weighed in to say essentially the same thing. Not doing nuance, combined with an impatience for study, for reflection, for weighing of information, plus a contrasting commitment to listening to the belly, trusting the gut, black and white disambiguation – all these things McAdams seizes on as indicators of a "basic endogenous tendency." They signal a trait: low cognitive openness. This is McAdams's starting point, his first level of inquiry. He recommends it as a general principle, not an end in itself, but a first consideration: the actor's *dispositional signature*. Whatever one thinks of Five Factor Theory – and the sharpest irritation concerns that loaded last term's aroma of overreach, since to many it isn't a theory at all – traits work to describe, and they predict a surprising range of life outcomes, some counterintuitive (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). They are a sort of superstructural machinery, five latent spinning wheels propelling and braking. McAdams suggests using what you can of what they have to offer while also alertly attending to out-of-character incidents, moments of anomalousness. Doing this, he comes to conclude that Bush is high E (extraversion) and low O (openness). Thus, the decider's decision to invade Iraq was, in trait terms, a *fait accompli*: "Extraversion supplied the necessary optimism and the relentless cheerleading that helped to sustain commitment to the choices made; low openness to experience brooked no uncertainties in the decision's wake, no doubts" (McAdams, 2010, p. 44). It is not the whole story; traits are never the whole story. But it's an element, one fraction of a larger convergence of reasons. So, don't overrate traits, but don't discount them either. In psychobiography, they are a conversation starter.

McAdams's next level of analysis is "characteristic adaptations," the ways in which traits express themselves. Here the question is what traits make one do in context, how they preset parameters on actions. Traits are not patterns of behavior; nor are they the "plans, skills, and desires that lead to patterns of behavior." They aren't publicly observable; they aren't available to "private introspection" (see McCrae & Costa, 2008, p. 163). Those more *visible* components of personality – attitudes, roles, relationships, defenses – are habitual (reflecting an enduring core) and responsive (a reaction to ever-changing social environments). *Traits, being invisible, are thus inferred from characteristic adaptations.* And while it may smack of obfuscation to uncouple the two concepts, that is what McCrae and Costa (2008) did. Practically speaking, the psychobiographer works with characteristic adaptations; traits are off-stage voices.

A political position is a characteristic adaptation; Bush's drinking is another, suggesting a trait on which McAdams does not dwell, neuroticism (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). It's always helpful to zero in on moments of intersection. One McAdams explores concerns the death of Bush's sister. At first he was spared information about the direness of Robin's situation. When at last she died, a crushing development for which he was not prepared at all, he adapted characteristically. Driven by the motor of extraversion, he turned, immaturely but understandably, to the comic mode. His focus was on treating his mother's grief. He joked, he clowned, he distracted, he played the fool – whatever he could think of to alter his mother's emotional state. Extraversion's core is positive affect, high hedonic capacity. Bush marshaled that core; it is what he knew; it is what came naturally. Let loose, this same clowning was overwhelmingly evident in Bush's college years. It also surfaced during his Presidency. Habitually – and that is what characteristic adaptations are, habits – he reverted to jester fool even on occasions calling for solemnity. A reporter might ask him a loaded, serious question. He'd reply with a joke about the reporter's tie. Habits are patterns, psychologically driven, with roots in needs tied to basic endogenous tendencies. When affect became unpleasantly hot, Bush goofed off. Sometimes charismatically and winningly, sometimes bizarrely and pathetically, he undercut negative emotion, stopped it in its tracks. Even when he got "serious" – stern, authoritative, blunt – the sense was that this was an alien mode. Clowning required no effort; seriousness did. (Therefore, he always seemed to be faking seriousness.)

Relational strategies fit here, too; they also evolve. As research on attachment shows, security or insecurity around others correlates predictably with "Big Five" dimensions (Noftle & Shaver, 2006). The key relationship in Bush's (W's) life was with his father, George HW. McAdams summed up the details. HW went to Andover and Yale, and was a member of the DKE frat and of secret society Skull and Bones; ditto for W. HW was a fighter pilot; ditto for W. HW taught Sunday School; ditto for W. HW was a baseball star; W became part owner of the Texas Rangers, printing out baseball cards vaingloriously of himself. HW made it big in oil; W tried that, too. At 20, HW proposed to a Smith girl; at 20, W proposed to a Smith girl. And of course, like HW, W was elected President and, exactly like dad did, went after unutterably barbaric sadist Saddam Hussein (see McAdams, 2010, p. 72). It's one thing to admire and respect your father. It's another to try being your father. The former seems healthy and expectable; the latter outstandingly odd. The question is: What does this mean psychologically?

Descriptively, when it came to key moments in the pursuit of identity – choosing a college, a mate, a career – Bush took the path more traveled, the one his father made by walking. In this instance, then, zeroing in on a relationship, a key one, exposes a

sort of ontological insecurity. As McAdams explained, up until around age 40, Bush had scant idea who he was. He did two things, then: he became who someone else was, and he drank a lot. Here one can speculate again about interactions between levels of personality. We know from research that neuroticism (N) correlates with alcohol abuse. "Self-consciousness" is another N facet, as is "anxiety." These may plausibly be seen as driving a characteristic adaptation (level two) leading to identity foreclosure: When in doubt, be dad. In other words, relatively high N led to a practical solution relating to problems of self-formation. For McAdams, no single level – traits, characteristic adaptations – is sufficient unto itself. Using his model to size up a life requires a constant systems mindset: Facts at one level call for adaptations at another, and because of how the brain is organized modularly, how it automatically interprets, any densely determined episode gets cloaked in narrative. In the end, we tell a story to ourselves and others to make sense of what we just did. We narrate our characteristic adaptations.

It is usually at the level of stories, the unconsciously motivated construction of what Tomkins called scripts, stimulus–affect–response sequences, that personality finds artistic unity. Scripts package life episodes into mini theories of self; they perform an ordering function. Bush was perfectly constituted to decide on invading Iraq: high E supplied the confidence, the enthusiasm, the energy, the impulsiveness, low O the disinclination to carefully weigh alternatives. The father issue, too, required attending to. He had matched dad in becoming President; now there was the possibility of at last outdoing him, finishing what HW never did. As for the story element, what Bush wound up scripting was a combination of God and Norman Rockwell, atonement and recovery. All people want freedom; all people want liberty – we know because God said so. And there is only one God, the God of Texas. Any other is fraudulent, a delusion. Onto this liberation motif Bush superimposed a nostalgic memory of Utopia, his "West Texas version of a New Jerusalem" – Midland, the town in which he grew up. A place, McAdams says, where children play and adults work, where neighbors look out for each other, where authority is benevolent, where souls are pure and freedom rings. Bush had redeemed himself – he found God, he gave up drinking. Now, at his life story's urging, he would redeem Iraq, make it into a Midland. This, after all, was God's will, and Bush was only an instrument. "The only acceptable plot," McAdams writes, "for America's story was the same plot that characterized [Bush's]: the recovery of goodness, security, and freedom. The only acceptable ending was America's victory, as God's liberating champion."

John Lennon

McAdams's approach is conceptual. He spreads an organizing, a priori structure over Bush's life – person as actor (dispositional traits), person as motivated agent altering the environment (characteristic adaptations), person as author (story maker) – and sizes Bush up according to these three levels of personality organization. It's one possible approach, and in McAdams's hands it works. Tim Kasser takes a different tack in his study of John Lennon (Kasser, 2013). Just like McAdams, he begins with a specific question: Why did Lennon write "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds"? But he postpones detailed examination of the biography, and starts with the song as a decontextualized object. He treats the song as data.

First, Kasser runs "Lucy" through Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program, a content-analytic tool that codes text according to a number of theory-neutral preset categories. That alone can't accomplish much, as Kasser realizes; there's a need for comparison groups. So, he also includes prior Lennon songs written around the same time, as well as a set of #1 songs by different artists – all released in the same year. In some ways, it turns out, "Lucy" isn't very different from the comparables; in other ways, it is. There is, for instance, more distancing in "Lucy" (the song's in second-person), less overall emotion ("everyone smiles," but apart from that, no other emotion words appear). The profile resembles the kind one meets with in a person who is lying. Kasser notes these facts, but sets aside the question of why.

Next Kasser extracts a script from the song, using Silvan Tomkins's model, and checks for reliability by asking another, blind researcher to do the same. In essence, the scripts match, each describing an effort to connect with an awesome, exalted female figure who is unreachable – the titular Lucy. Kasser discovers a strikingly similar script at work in Lennon's first two songs (Alexander's primacy cue, recommending a focus on "firsts"). There's a pattern, always key in psychobiography. Girls tend to materialize, they tantalize and beckon, all while remaining essentially elusive. Again, Kasser does not yet interpret. He establishes a pattern, then moves on.

Maybe most impressively of all, Kasser performs a word association analysis of the tune, operating under the assumption of spreading activation. He looks for occurrences of *every* "Lucy" word in *every* prior Lennon composition; finding them, he analyzes context of usage, the meaning in which each word seems to be embedded. What he finds are several clusters of categories, intertwined ideas: separation, sadness, and death; ambivalent feelings about interpersonal relationships; and hiding of one's feelings and of self.

Then, finally, since the song is a song after all, Kasser identifies its eight core musical features, finding that these most closely match two prior songs Lennon called his "truest": "Help" and "Strawberry Fields Forever". The first is a declaration of insecurity and lostness, the second a psychedelic homage.

What's notable about Kasser's method is its quality of largely neutral investigation, its admirably multimethodological character. He minimizes or eliminates potential biases by working with data and seeing what the data reveal. To a degree, he removes himself from the discovery process. He does not start with the life or with any sort of theory or conceptual superstructure. He starts instead with the phenomenon, the song, then cautiously, incrementally teases out a number of basic features he compares with previous Lennon tunes. Elms and Heller (2005) do the same with Elvis and his song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" The goal, initially, is descriptive. They explore the song's history; they analyze a number of Elvis's intermittently bizarre performances of the song; they examine how its themes resurface in a number of earlier Elvis tunes; then they explore the circumstances surrounding Elvis's baseline recording. A mistake psychobiographers sometimes make is frontloading theory. Essentially, they lay out what they believe then show how the phenomenon fits. This is, most of the time, a strategic error at best. Conclusions emerge as tendentious *fait accomplis*. It's usually far better to do as Kasser and Elms and Heller do: present the phenomenon. Dissect it as phenomenon, describe it fully and richly. Contextualize it. Foreground it. In other words, postpone interpretation. Do not rush.

So, for Kasser, more than the first half of the book is a meditation on the inner life of the song; the song is the person. It almost seems to lack an author. As I said before,

"Lucy" is treated like a found object, some shiny glass bibelot that rolled in with the tide, obscure, mysterious, of uncertain origin. Then, that accomplished, Lennon himself enters the picture. His early life of abandonment; his move, made necessary by his parents' unsuitability as parents, to the home of his Aunt Mimi, who raised him; and then, just as he was beginning to reestablish contact, the death of his mother Julia, who was struck by an off-duty policeman as she crossed a busy road. She died instantly. Lennon was waiting for her at her home. Police delivered the ghastly news. In "Julia," a song Lennon wrote a year after "Lucy", he begins with the line, a small bit of self-analysis – "Half of what I say is meaningless/But I say it just to reach you, Julia." Kasser finds this judgment essentially true. Lucy is, in large part, Julia, the unreachable female muse who appears then disappears, who is simultaneously there and not there. Now, under more ordinary circumstances, the finding that Lucy is Julia – ***more than*** Julia, of course, but ***mainly*** her – might seem suspiciously trite, half-baked, uber-Freudian. But because Kasser worked to this conclusion so organically, so open-mindedly, starting from scratch and building in layered increments, it comes across as anything but, as virtually inevitable. This is one mark of a satisfying, effective, well-constructed psychobiography: its interpretations arrive like forgone conclusions.

Truman Capote

Bush never claimed to be a genius. In fact, he more often claimed – jokingly, one supposes – the opposite (as did countless others). Lennon did; he did call himself a genius. So did Capote, and in Capote's case, the proclamation was vouchsafed by science. As a kid, he took an IQ test – because his family thought he was "subnormal" – and scored off the charts (or so he said).

McAdams begins with dispositional traits, Kasser with the song itself. In my book on Capote (Schultz, 2011b), I start with what McAdams terms level three: stories. There is always a question of the jumping-off point in psychobiography. Again, it is difficult to offer formulaic advice on where, how, or even when to start. My instinct is to let the life decide. Capote was, with Wildean flourish, a storyteller.

Stories are affect-laden scenes, and scenes contain scripts – sets of rules for ordering, interpreting, and predicting families of discrete happenings. One fact about Capote that presents, temporarily, a degree of challenge is that when he told tales about his life, truth took a back seat to artistry. What really happened carried far less weight than what could have or should have. So what to do? Discount what Capote said? Set it aside in search of the facts? Devalue it? No. Fact or fiction, stories are psychologically real. All memory is construction. The question has less to do with veridicality than with framing. In this instance, repetition also plays a role. Capote told the same stories over and over. That fact suggests urgency, what Alexander, in his textual indicators, refers to as *frequency*. Specifically, Alexander advises paying close attention to episodes that tend to recur, the assumption being that repetition suggests conflict and a degree of emotional unfinishedness. We keep narrating scenes that are problematic; the narration is a way of making sense.

Capote, it turns out, told four stories over and over again. That he did so is not an accident; it isn't arbitrary. It's motivated. They were his "go to" leitmotifs whenever he felt a need to sum up who he was. All were "factions," combined fact and fiction; all

were subjectively italicized. One concerns being locked in a hotel room at age 2 as his parents partied the night away; another features Capote as a child plaintively watching his mother drive off in a big Buick kicking up dust. In Tomkins's script model, scenes are the primary unit of analysis. They package affect. But what they mean on their own amounts to less than what they mean as crystallized scripts. The goal, in other words, is script extraction, finding plots of self embedded in self-described happenings like the hotel room lock-in. These first two stories describe what might be called, casually, an "ouch" script, or what McAdams terms a contamination sequence. Something possibly good turns bad, and the outcome is negative emotion. Core (in the sense of repetitive) stories imply core (in the sense of life governing and organizing) scripts.

Capote told two more stories with equal frequency – the IQ test tale (he aced the instrument twice, to the shock of all involved) and a story about a story, "Mrs. Busybody," he wrote at age 8 – or so he claims, likely hyperbolically – that pillories a gossipy neighbor and provokes outrage and scandal in Monroeville, Alabama, where Capote grew up, raised by aunts. As they always potentially do, these scenes capture another script, one I call "table-turning." Capote is underestimated, devalued, dismissed, then proves all doubters wrong. Doubt me at your peril, the stories seem to say.

The theme of Capote's life was abandonment; he lived, as he said, in constant fear of losing love. His father disappeared. His mother did, too, then came back intermittently only to leave yet again. Capote's attachment style was insecure. The "ouch" script encoded that fact. It put him on red alert; it predicted love loss. And as scripts are often self-validating, love loss is what he got, again and again. But he also made use of what Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg (2003) call deactivating adult attachment-related strategies. He liked to present himself as emotionally bullet-proof. He pretended not to care what people thought. He denied feeling. He bragged that he could not be hurt. This style – more avoidant than anxious – is what the "table-turning" script encapsulates. Belittle him, threaten him, question his power, and he comes at you like a barracuda. In fact, he abandons preemptively, as if relationships mean nothing to him.

To be expected, all these dynamics partially determined the content of Capote's fiction. His first stories were often about unreachable, crazy, and crazy-making females who tormented their pursuers. His first novel – *Other Voices, Other Rooms* – featured a boy's search for a lost father who never quite turns up, at least not as anticipated. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Holly Golightly teases then disappears forever. Her real name is Lulumae; Capote's mother's name was Lillie Mae. In *In Cold Blood*, Capote falls miserably in love with a killer, Perry Smith, sure to abandon him, in this case with terrible finality – the "ouch" script par excellence. Then, finally, in his mysteriously unfinished final work, *Answered Prayers*, Capote sauteed the jet set "swans" – rich women like C. Z. Guest and Gloria Vanderbilt – with whom he had become quite close. He tattled on trillionaires whose stories he had been hoarding, whose confidences he'd artfully extracted. When excerpts appeared, Capote was instantly blacklisted. A curtain fell. No one spoke to him; his calls went unanswered and unreturned. The rich had treated Capote like a mantelpiece object. He was their pocket Merlin – funny, droll, richly amusing. In short, they underestimated him. They saw him as less than who he was, a powerful writer. So, according to the "table-turning" script, he made them pay. It was "Mrs. Busybody" redux, this time on a grander scale. He rejected the rejecters. But what he got, in the end, was more "ouch." He died alone and addicted, a subintentioned suicide.

Implicit Prescriptions

Now, it is possible, with these three exemplars in mind, to explore commonalities as a way of getting at aspects of method, what to do and what not to do in psychobiographies of genius. At minimum, the following details emerge:

1. An absence of diagnosis. A lot of bad psychobiography reduces to a search for disorder, a sort of mindless pinning the tail on the donkey. That approach is never satisfactory. It's specious, a way of not understanding. Diagnoses are labels; labels are descriptions. They are not, and cannot be, explanations. Using labels as explanations, then, can't be anything but tautology. This is an obvious point, but it's routinely missed. Though it might sometimes seem otherwise, psychobiography is not diagnosis-hunting. Or when it is, it's bad – shallow, misguided, unilluminating.
2. An absence of reductionism. In all the above examples, the thing to be explained is approached as a product of converging vectors, each contributing a fractional amount of explanatory power to the overall variance. No single cause is sought or found. We don't do anything for one reason. (I'm not writing this chapter for one reason; you aren't reading it for one reason.) Bush did not decide to invade Iraq because of traits or his father or his memories of bucolic, pristine Midland. He did it for all those reasons combined, plus a host of transpersonal considerations, as McAdams makes plain. Lennon did not write "Lucy" because he had lost his mother Julia. The song was also inspired by Lewis Carroll and by a drawing given to Lennon by his son Julian, Kasser explains. Plus, LSD was in the air. For a time, Lennon was taking it almost daily. The song is therefore part of an acid zeitgeist. Kasser's LIWC analysis revealed lyrical features that seemed to suggest altered states of consciousness, such as a preoccupation with space and time. Needs are always symphonic. They blend to create a sound that is action. Freud called this overdetermination, the idea that multiple reasons interact to produce an outcome. Reductionism's antidote is overdetermination. It is an operating principle to keep firmly in mind at all times. It is reality.
3. The use of personality science. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a Jungian, Kohutian, or Kleinian psychobiography. They aren't uncommon. They can be disappointing; they can be enlightening. But the concepts – of, say, archetypes or the death instinct – do not often possess plain scientific credibility. They have not been scientifically validated. That is not to say they aren't true – they may be – but they lack experimental confirmation. Traits, redemption and contamination sequences, attachment styles, adult attachment-related strategies, even scripts – all these notions have been the subject of sometimes incredibly impressive empirical investigation. The fact is, a psychobiography is only as sound as the ideas on which it relies. If the ideas are suspect, the psychobiography is suspect. It comes down to theory choice. Don't use concepts whose validity is easily contestable or, worse, outright dubious.
4. Serious consideration of alternative interpretations. McAdams entertains possible Freudian angles on Bush's father complex but finds them "bogus" (in this instance, I disagree). Kasser outlines a handful of prior attempts to make sense of Lucy, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each in turn. At the conclusion of their Elvis essay, Elms and Heller (2005) summarize three alternate scenarios. Each is

shown to be less than persuasive. Psychological analyses of genius don't happen in a vacuum. Surrounding major figures one always encounters a climate of opinion. It's best not to behave as if that opinion does not exist. It's better yet to show how new opinions bestow advantages old ones do not.

5 Taking the long view. Childhood is key in any life. Its importance can't be denied. Attachment research makes that fact indisputable. It's a settled issue. But childhood isn't everything. Strategies evolve and refine themselves. Turning points do seem to occur. Adulthood ushers in new conflicts, new goals, different sorts of challenges. Psychobiography is a lifespan enterprise. The books on Bush, Lennon, and Capote analyze childhood feelings and behaviors, but they do not stop there. They track continuities and discontinuities. For instance, Bush gave up drinking around age 40. This was a major moment. Lennon met Yoko. That, too, was a major moment. Lives unfold in chapters. Each deserves attention.

6 Adopting a multimethodological and multitheoretical stance. No single theory ever quite suffices, in my view. Lives are combinations of processes and motives. In a strange way, psychobiography performs a sort of unblending – isolating components, then slowly recombining. Stepping back and looking closely at the three long-form studies summarized above, it's striking how much psychological research is made use of: script theory; attachment theory; Five Factor Theory; the life-story model; redemption sequences; the LIWC; word association; the spreading activation model.

In psychobiography, these six tips are essential to follow. They make for a minimum standard, as do excellent overviews of aspects of psychobiographical methodology explored by Anderson (2005), Elms (2005), McAdams (2005), and Runyan (2005). Are they enough? Probably not. At root, psychobiography is an interpretive practice. It requires, more than broad guidelines, perceptiveness, creativity, the ability to see connections, the capacity for insight, and, prior to any of these, the ingenuity to ask the right questions, the ones others overlooked or saw, wrongly, as unpromising. Life begins in mystery and ends in ambiguity. It's messy; it's blurry; there are no definitive answers. That may be the final lesson. You never really know for sure. Truth is direction, not destination.

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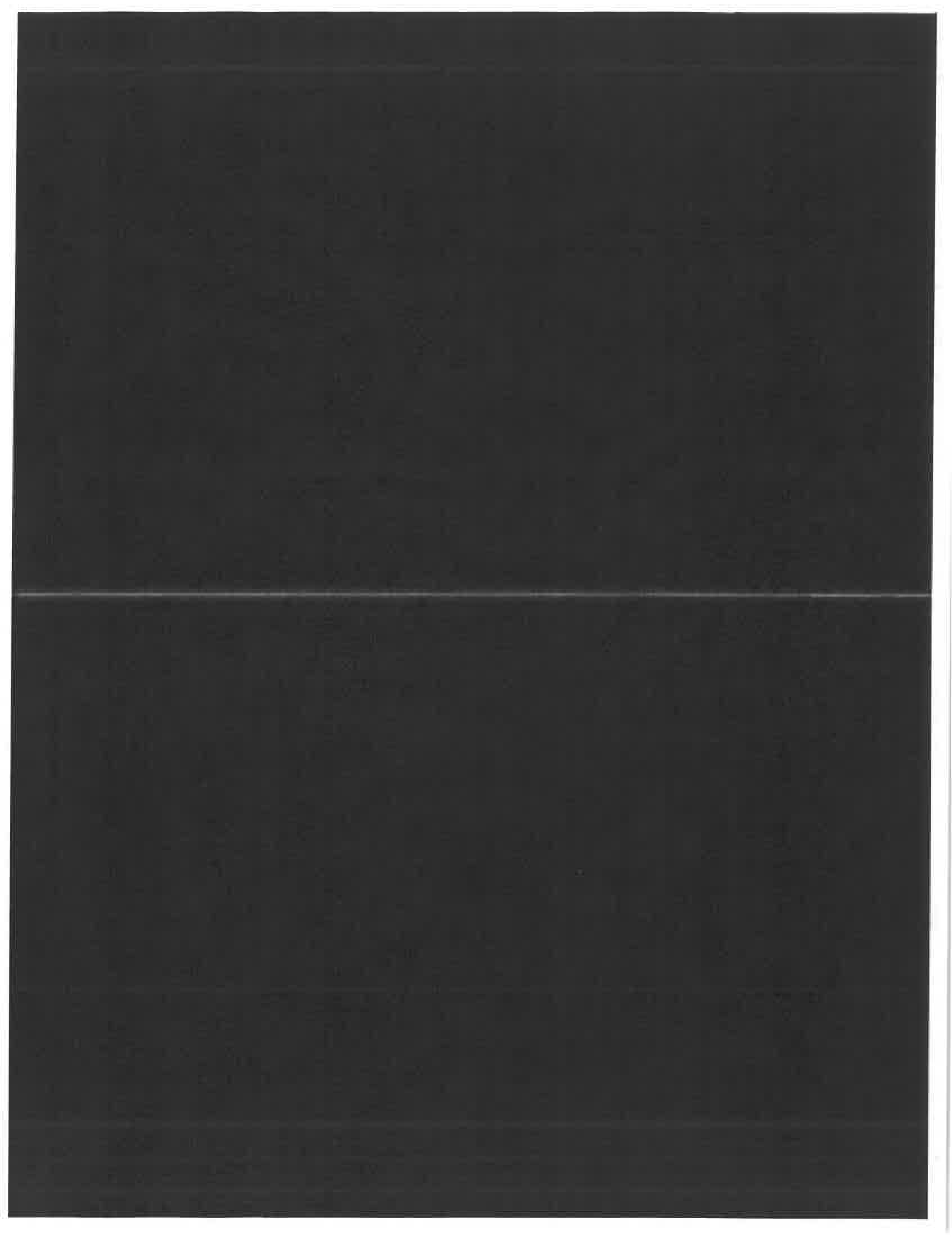

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