

# Psychobiography: Theory and Method

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Psychobiography is best understood as a branch of applied personality science in which experimental findings are used to explore the lives and personalities of public figures, from artists to politicians. This article introduces the field, addresses questions commonly raised about it, and explores, among other subjects, what psychobiographical research might offer to the field of psychology. Two recent model psychobiographies are described in detail—McAdams's (2010) profile of George W. Bush and Kasser's (2013) analysis of John Lennon—both of which are oriented scientifically and rooted in experimentally derived concepts. Lastly, criteria for evaluating psychobiographical studies are summarized, as well as attributes of effective psychobiography that tend to include the components of fact, fit, and function.

*Keywords:* psychobiography, Big Five, attachment theory, script theory, personality

Psychobiography, or the systematic study of individual lives, is a way of doing psychology (Elms, 1993). It is not the usual way, in that  $N$  equals 1. It is not a way with which most psychologists are conversant, because the method is far more likely to be qualitative than quantitative. Yet as a means of generating precise, effective understandings of persons, psychobiography offers unique direction (Schultz, 2005).

As the vast majority of experimental and strictly scientifically trained psychologists have, understandably, little awareness of what psychobiography is or how it is conducted, this article begins with an attempt to define the practice, to situate it in current and historical context, and to address commonly encountered criticisms—formal and informal—from inside and outside the psychological field. Then, as a way of illustrating psychobiographical methodology, focus is shifted to two recent and especially successful “model” psychobiographies: McAdams's (2010) *George*

*W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream: A Psychological Portrait* and Kasser's (2013) *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*. A final section devotes itself to an exploration of criteria for evaluating psychobiographical interpretations, and to attributes of psychobiographies that tend to be particularly effective.

## Defining Psychobiography

The term “psychobiography” is shorthand for psychological biography. If it is, as suggested, a way of doing psychology, the area of psychology it most engages is personality (McAdams, 2005). In that sense, it is a way of doing personality psychology specifically. Current, scientifically generated personality science findings are thoughtfully combined, and then applied to the facts of a life, usually one of historical significance (e.g., a political figure such as Barack Obama or an artist such as Pablo Picasso). Psychobiographies focus less on the ascertainable details of a life—the whens and wheres—and more on what those details reveal about a person's inner experience—motives, coping techniques, goals, and/or styles of relating (Schultz, 2005). Psychobiographies tend to be specific, restricted to one psychologically potent question. For instance, why did Elvis Presley have such difficulty performing the song “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” (Elms & Heller, 2005), or how did Ludwig Wittgenstein's fear of death affect his philosophizing (Schultz, 1999)?

Psychobiography's modern beginnings can be traced to Freud and his flawed analysis of Leonardo, but the practice goes back as far as the Greeks. More recently, three books in particular have advanced the field: Runyan's (1984) *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory*

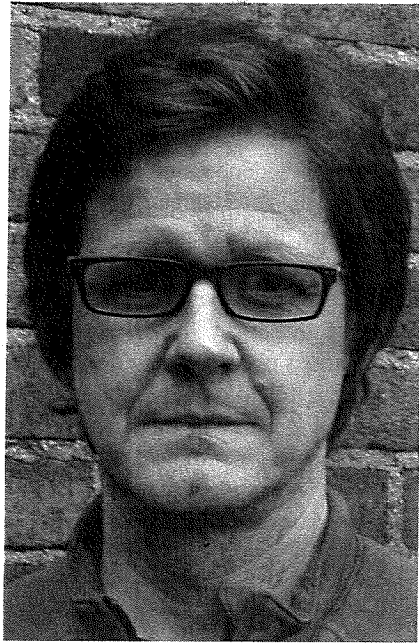
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and Method, a mainly epistemological inquiry; Elms's (1993) *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology*, a collection of essays on subjects from Vladimir Nabokov to Jimmy Carter to Saddam Hussein; and Schultz's (2005) *Handbook of Psychobiography*, with detailed "how-to" sections and chapters on psychologists and thinkers, political figures, and artists. Other significant, benchmark works include Anderson (2005), Arnold (2016), Schultz (2011b), Stolorow and Atwood (1977), Alexander (1990), and Ogilvie (2003). In 1988, the *Journal of Personality* dedicated a special issue to the subject of psychobiography and life narratives (McAdams & Ochberg, 1988); in 1997, also in *Journal of Personality*, Nasby and Read (1997) presented a detailed case study of solo circumnavigator Dodge Morgan. These efforts show how psychobiography functions as a form of psychology. They make explicit and implicit cases for its value to the field, and provide proscriptive and prescriptive guidelines. Yet still, the field exists in the margins—not exactly science (although it utilizes scientific findings), not exactly art; not purely subjective, not usually purely objective. Some even wonder if it is psychology at all. This uncertainty is exciting and confusing—exciting because the field is still being defined; confusing because, by now, there ought to be less doubt about what psychobiography might offer to the field, or especially about what it is.

We spend vast amounts of time trying to understand people in our lives or in the world, people we know and do not know. We scrutinize the motives or personalities of serial killers and bombers, political candidates, rock stars, and reality show contestants. For evolved, hard-wired reasons, we cannot not do this (Gazzaniga, 1998). Humans are

social animals, and understanding each other is vital to survival. In fact, it is vital for nearly everything we do. We need to invent explanatory stories, not just for other people but for ourselves, too (McAdams, 1993).

This uniquely human pastime, an effort to understand *specific* others, is psychobiography's *raison d'être*. In careful, psychologically informed fashion, psychobiographers do *formally* what others do *informally*. The goal is not to generalize—although psychobiography can lead to testable, nomothetic hypotheses—nor to identify commonalities, but to approach each subject as *sui generis*.

Several questions get raised with frequency about psychobiography (Elms, 1993, 2007; Schultz, 2005). Some are conceptual, some methodological, some frankly skeptical. Most seem to be based on beliefs about what is or is not psychology or on normative positions regarding what psychology as a discipline *should* be. Following are four common queries.

### **How Is Psychobiography Any Different From the Folk Psychology Applied Nightly on Talk and News Shows? Isn't It Simply an Elevated Form of Gossip?**

The answer here is that psychobiographers are personality experts. They know the scientific research; they know the theories and concepts. A news show discussant might call a public figure narcissistic. In contrast, a psychobiographer would approach the subject more expansively: narcissism comes in two forms, vulnerable and grandiose (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003); it correlates with all six facets of the Neuroticism dimension (Bagby, Costa, Widiger, Ryder, & Marshall, 2005); it is indirectly associated, via Big Five trait correlations, with insecure forms of attachment (Nofhle & Shaver, 2006). Quality psychobiographers rarely content themselves with labeling, but if they take that route, they grasp the complexities (Schultz, 2005). Their range of association is wider, and that inspires wiser, nonobvious, and subtler interpretations.

### **What Is the Precise Nature of the Relationship Between Biography and Psychobiography?**

Psychobiography always starts with biography, the facts of the life, the thick description. As an approach to the study of personality, it cannot function absent rich biographical data. You gather the most you can from credible, varied sources, and you ask the data questions and let the data reveal themselves (Alexander, 1990). This is when things may stall. It is the first hurdle. In a thesis recently supervised by the primary author of this article (Northway, 2015), the subject was Wes Anderson, famous for films like "Rushmore," "The Royal Tennenbaums," and "Moonrise Kingdom." Northway was full of ideas, her knowledge of the



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films impressive. She saw themes, patterns, and recurrences of ostensible psychological import. But there was scarcely anything known about Anderson's actual life. He was guarded, he waved off personal concerns, and he professed ignorance about autobiographical features of the work. As psychobiography, then, the thesis was untenable. It could not succeed because it lacked the necessary biographical ballast.

Psychobiography is parasitical on biography. It sorts through the facts described in biographies in order to arrive at psychological conclusions. At the same time, what we seem to require of first-rate biographies is that they offer compelling psychological portraits. They are not merely extra-detailed itineraries. In the typical biography, however, the psychology remains offstage. Not so for psychobiography, which highlights concepts prominently, describes them, and telegraphs their application.

### **Isn't Psychobiography Too Subjective, Too Interpretive? And If So, How Can Psychobiographies Claim to Arrive at Some Version of Truth About a Person?**

Psychobiography requires inference and interpretation. It goes beyond text (the facts of the life) to subtext (the psychological meaning of the facts). This calls for perspicacity, ingenuity, an ability to see connections, and a talent for reading people. Put differently, psychobiographers are *interpreters*. But this is not to say all interpretations are equal. Interpretations can be judged by sets of sensible criteria (Runyan, 2005). Using these criteria, some interpretations get exposed as flawed, whereas others survive me-

ticulous scrutiny. There is no positivistic "Truth" possible in psychobiography. What one hopes to arrive at, instead, is a provisional, narrative truth—truth as illuminating coherence (Spence, 1982). Legal proceedings constitute one analogy. Competing cases are made, each representing an alternate reading of evidence, and juries decide which argument is most cogent. The standard is reasonable doubt, as it is, most of the time, for psychobiography.

Psychobiography is not always subjective. It can be and has been done relatively objectively, too. The first practitioner of this form was Simonton (2004), with his large-scale studies of genius and creative eminence. McCrae and Greenberg (2014) analyzed jazz composer John Coltrane. Seeking a measure of interrater reliability, they tested their observations of Coltrane's dispositional traits against those made by independent raters—two of Coltrane's most critically acclaimed biographers—who judged Coltrane to be average on Neuroticism and Extraversion, high on Conscientiousness, and very high on Agreeableness and Openness. In a brilliantly multimethodological analysis of the John Lennon song "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," Tim Kasser (2013; see Approach #2: Kasser's Multimethodological Empiricism) also utilizes quantitative methodologies of various types. Psychobiography is *often* subjective, but it *does not have to be*. In fact, it probably impresses most when it combines objective and subjective modes, using the former as a check against, or stimulant for, the latter.

### **What Can Psychobiography Do for the Field of Psychology? What Is Its Value?**

To adopt a phrasing initially articulated by Elms (1993), psychobiography "tests the statistically significant against the personally significant" (p. 13). It assembles findings from across subdisciplines and assesses their practical usefulness in the context of a real life. This focused application is rare. It is not part of the typical experimental procedure (nor should it be, necessarily). Psychobiography therefore fills a void, performing a quasi-usefulness test. As Elms explained,

Lives are not lived in the laboratory. In the real world, personalities are not divided into statistically analyzable compartments. Experimental and correlational studies, and statistical analyses of the data they generate, may identify significant variables in the lives of people-in-general. But I haven't encountered a psychologist yet who could put together a whole person from those statistical body-parts and honestly cry out, "It's Alive!" (p. 13)

Gordon Allport (1940) advanced a similar line of thought, noting how psychologists "seem relatively uninterested in what the individual case can teach us, or in checking our scientific schemes against the obdurate concrete event" (p. 3), the individual person. He continued,

If seven in 10 Americans go to the movies each week, it does not follow that I have seven in 10 chances of attending. Only a knowledge of my attitudes, interests, and environmental situation will tell you my chances, and bring your prediction from a 70% actuarial statement to a 100% certain individual prediction. (p. 3)

Psychology, he concludes, “will become more scientific when it has learned to evaluate single trends in all their intrinsic complexity” (p. 3). We have evolved a successful psychology of the generalized other; we do not as yet possess an equally successful psychology of the “obdurate” single person.

Aside from application, there is potential for theory development in psychobiography. Carlson (1988) called life histories the “perfect laboratory.” “Finished lives,” she said, “enable us to trace personality development in ways that are impossible in even the best longitudinal researches” (p. 106). Lives also include, according to Carlson, a possibility for “consensual validation” in ways strictly clinical case studies do not.

Examples of the use of life histories for theory refinement are numerous. Sigmund Freud analyzed Leonardo da Vinci to explore the nature of homosexuality and sublimation (Freud, 1990). Humanist Abraham Maslow, despairing of making headway on the study of fully functioning persons via traditional scientific procedures, turned his attention to biography (Maslow, 1993). He compiled a list of historical figures he believed showed signs of self-actualizing, and he investigated them carefully, in the end formulating a potentially generalizable portrait of optimally evolved “human specimens.” R. D. Laing immersed himself in the phenomenology of schizophrenic experience and emerged with the false-self system and the notion of ontological insecurity (Laing, 1965). Schultz’s (2005) concept of the “prototypical scene,” a constellating self-defining memory, derived from psychobiographical research into the lives of Jack Kerouac, Diane Arbus, Truman Capote, Franz Kafka, Kathryn Harrison, and Sylvia Plath. In neuroscience, the use of the single case has proved invaluable for theory articulation. Ramachandran (1999) focused on “outliers” in order to create speculative models of brain mechanisms behind phantom limbs, anosognosia, and Bonnet Syndrome. In understanding single cases, we sometimes develop group-level explanations that, at least potentially, go beyond the individual.

Questioning the practice of psychobiography is appropriate. Self-scrutiny advances science, encouraging conceptual and methodological refinements. At the same time, the case study has always played an important, if peripheral, role in the field (Barenbaum & Winter, 2003). John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner (Watson & Rayner, 1920) had their “Little Albert”; Gordon Allport (1965) had his “Jenny.” Psychologists generally are taught to think in terms of group- and

universal-level explanations. But as Runyan (1984) argued, the individual level may be just as deserving of emphasis, even though it does not lead to articulation of general laws.

In addition to the above reasons, what seems more and more clear in the context of recent elections is the value of psychobiography—truly revelatory psychobiography—in assessing the character of candidates. Voters need to know about positions leaders take on pressing issues, but they also need (and want) to know about emotional preparedness, the psychological qualities that presage failure or success in office. Presently, questions swirl around Donald Trump particularly. These questions are squarely psychological and demand psychologically informed and psychologically credible answers. In politics, then, psychobiography serves a critical purpose. It has the potential to shed extraordinarily revealing light on the personalities of those who lead. As Elms and Song (2005) observe, “certain candidates are highly visible for years before they declare for the Presidency [e.g., Hillary Clinton or Jeb Bush]—time enough for several psychobiographers to launch and complete . . . individual studies” and for “astute political commentators” to disseminate the findings (p. 309). (For just one example of this kind of politically focused personality profile, see McAdams, 2016, on Trump in the magazine *The Atlantic*.)

Lastly, psychobiography has the potential for strengthening clinical work. Arnold (2016), a clinician, recently published a full-length psychological analysis of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. Dick had elaborated various paranoid fantasies of a seemingly psychotic character. He was also a long time drug abuser. Arnold argues that Dick was not in fact schizophrenic, and that to see him as such obscures the nature of his far more complex psychospiritual crisis, and his attempts, however unsatisfactory, at psychospiritual healing. Clinical work begins with effective case formulation. Essentially, this is what psychobiography broadly is: case formulation. Familiarity with methods in the field and with how psychobiography makes use of the concepts of personality science can lead to more sensitive, more rounded clinical understandings and interventions. Schultz (2011a), in his psychobiography of midcentury photographer Diane Arbus, who died of suicide in 1971, examines the process of Arbus’s psychotherapy (through interviews with Arbus’s therapist, Helen Boigon, before Boigon’s death in 2009). He discusses its assumptions, the way in which the therapy lacked clear direction, Arbus’s behavior in the therapeutic setting, and how Arbus’s sexual needs interfered with her attempts to get well—on one occasion, Arbus tried seducing Boigon. Schultz’s conclusion is that the therapy failed; he discusses the various reasons why (Schultz, 2011a). In this instance, an understanding of Arbus’s personality can alert treaters to the kinds of clinical challenges similar patients present and thus lead to mindful preparation or treatment plans.

Dan McAdams (1995) outlined a master template for the study of personality. Initially, he proposed three levels of analysis, each irreducible to the other: traits, personal concerns (which he later renamed characteristic adaptations), and stories. To these McAdams and Pals (2006) subsequently added biology and culture. In 2005, McAdams offered the same ideas as a model for organizing research in psychobiography (McAdams, 2005). The question is asked all the time: How is psychobiography actually done? The answer, presently, is clearer. There is the structured McAdams approach, which he employed in his case study of George W. Bush. And there is the multimethodological, mostly atheoretical approach utilized by Tim Kasser (2013) in his analysis of John Lennon. Each of these works is described below in an attempt to piece together a road map, a "how to."

## Psychobiography: A Pair of "How To" Options

### Approach 1: Dan McAdams's Levels of Personality

**Traits.** Most psychobiographical subjects come with too much data in place—letters, diaries, biographies, autobiographies, critical commentaries. This is where McAdams's Level 1 applies: trait analysis. To order and prioritize data, traits require a focusing. In McAdams's terms, they amount to a "first read" on a person.

Today's leading trait model is five-factor theory or the "Big Five"—the dimensions of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. These are the basic personality tendencies identified over decades of testing, condensing, norming, and factor analysis (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Each of us has his or her dispositional signature. Traits are dichotomous (you can be high or low in them, although most people score in the middle range), orthogonal (they are separate dimensions), decontextualized (they do not change according to situation), inferred (they cannot be introspectively observed; see, for more on this subtle point, McCrae & Costa, 1999), and comparative (they are assessed in relative terms). Each dimension subsumes six subtraits or "facets."

McAdams (2010) begins his George W. Bush psychobiography with a trait-based analysis of the former president. Questions emerge immediately, such as, "Can one really know Bush's life story?"; "How much has been concealed?"; "Are we consigned to a 'press-release' version of self?" (Wiersma, 1988). Such difficulties are not specific to Bush. They arise in any political psychobiography, an inherently perilous enterprise (Elms & Song, 2005). Yet in Bush's case, we do know some life history details with certainty. The facts are not equally suspect.

McAdams (2010) homes in on extremes because extreme trait expressions are more likely to be determinative. It is

not especially useful to examine Bush's midlevel trait of, say, agreeableness. Extreme personality tendencies shape feelings and behavior most forcefully.

Bush was a class clown; he was also class president. People gravitated to him, found him charming and irresistible. His ease around others was palpable. Even those who considered his politics misguided felt as if he would be "an OK guy to have a beer with"—as many observers declared at the time. Bush was a charismatic, his positive affect infectious. He was quick with a joke, merry, and mischievous. In a campaign autobiography from 1999, Bush says, among other things, "I am restless; I am outgoing; I've always invaded people's spaces, touching, hugging, getting close; I am in perpetual motion" (see McAdams, 2010, p. 17).

What does this mean? To McAdams, this means that Bush was, and is, and always will be, a "blazing extravert." In fact, when a team of researchers rated presidents using Big Five inventories, Bush scored #1 in Extraversion (tied with Clinton and Teddy Roosevelt): 99.6 out of 100 (for details, see McAdams's [2010] summary). Rating a famous stranger on Big Five traits is subjective and interpretive, yet not impossible, especially when existing biographical data are detailed and thorough. The empirical evidence is clear, interrater-reliability high. McAdams reached his conclusions alone, but the team of experts vouched for his independent appraisals.

Bush was also famous (or infamous) for saying he didn't "do nuance" (McAdams, 2010). He liked to keep things simple, he kept to strict routines (eating the same meals every day), his need for change was minimal. He was never in restless pursuit of the new, never homesick for the unknown. He called himself the "Decider," and he saw things in black and white. He was, in a word, incurious. As Clinton said of him once, "He doesn't know anything; he doesn't want to know anything; but he is not dumb" (McAdams, 2010, p. 37). Columnist Nicholas Kristof added, "[He's] less interested in ideas than perhaps anybody I've ever interviewed" (quoted in McAdams, 2010, p. 47).

These facts show, according to McAdams (2010), that Bush is also low in Openness, a dimension characterized by curiosity, desire for novelty, love of mystery, and an abiding, very deep interest in ideas. Openness is the least clear, least coherent dimension of the Big Five. There are elements of it that fit Bush, too. He is likely high in sensation seeking, with which Openness correlates (McCrae & Costa, 1997). He also paints, and Openness predicts creativity and creative achievement. Cognitively, Bush is clearly low "O"; behaviorally, he may be more midrange.

McAdams (2010) takes these two findings, combines them, and then applies them to the specific question of why Bush pushed the decision to invade Iraq:

The actor *high in extraversion* will take bold risks on the social stage. He will swing for the fences. He will infuse his decision with dramatic positive emotions—the excitement we feel for the noble quest, the joy we will all feel when we save the world from weapons of mass destruction, when we assure happiness, freedom, and democracy. . . . The actor *low in openness* will trust his instincts or his deep convictions, and he will discount [or fail to seriously seek out or consider] alternative points of view. He will never doubt that he is on the right side of history. . . . He will not debate himself. . . . His admirers will marvel at his steadfast commitment. His critics will accuse him of being stubborn, inflexible, and dangerously out of touch. (p. 45)

Two points about use of the Big Five dimensions are in order. First, few psychobiographers believe traits to be *sufficient* as a means of understanding a person. They may be *necessary* for a nascent understanding, but alone they do not suffice (Schultz, 2016). The other point is this: Traits appear to be tautological, only speciously explanatory. Why is Bush so disinterested in ideas, why does he seem to lack intellectual curiosity? Because he is low in Openness. How do we know he is low in Openness? Because he is so disinterested in ideas and so lacking in intellectual curiosity. Yet traits possess impressive amounts of surplus meaning, and that fact is important (McCrae & Costa, 1999). For instance, those high in Openness are more likely to experiment with drugs or mind-altering activities (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Those high in Neuroticism are more likely to smoke and abuse alcohol (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). Those high in Extraversion earn more money over the course of the life span (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). Traits *describe* (and in some instances merely tell us what we already know), but they *extend*, too, because they point in directions unexpected.

**Personal concerns and characteristic adaptations.** For McCrae and Costa (1999), traits manifest at Level 2 as concrete expressions of basic endogenous tendencies, a person's characteristic (i.e., abiding) adaptations (i.e., evolved, habitual strategies). Level 2 is *what people actually do*, according to McCrae and Costa, not what they are preset to do. For instance, Josh may be high in Extraversion (Level 1), and his preference may be to read in crowded, noisy environments (Level 2). Totty may be low in Agreeableness (Level 1), and tend to throw things when people disagree with her (Level 2). McCrae and Costa prefer to see Level 2 as directly derived from, and wholly reducible to, traits. For them, traits and characteristic adaptations are symbiotic. McAdams (1995) disagrees. His Level 2-type behaviors can be irreducible, more time and situation specific, and also more changeable and unpredictable. As McAdams (1995) explains,

One should not be hasty to conceive of Level Two as derivative of Level One. Such a conception suggests a hierarchy in personality, wherein smaller units (personal concerns) are

neatly nested within larger units (dispositional traits), a scheme probably too pat and orderly to be true. While McCrae and Costa are right to concede that something outside the realm of traits (their "basic tendencies") should be included within the domain of personality, their claim that the "something outside" is essentially derivative of traits seems premature. I would suggest instead that personologists explore the terrain of Level Two directly, without the maps provided by the Big Five. (p. 379)

An idea central to McAdams's Level 2 is "domain specificity" (McAdams, 2005)—the notion that we act differently as a function of features of setting. Person A, for example, may rarely feel anxious when lecturing to students, yet experience extreme anxiety when lecturing to peers or to those perceived as superiors. Suturing Level 2 behaviors to traits results in an expectation of sameness, an assumption of unvarying, integrated consistency. In fact, though traits may propel the person in particular directions—toward or away from others, for instance—people sometimes act "out of character." Those moments call for an analysis assuming at least occasional independence between personality levels.

For McAdams (1995), Level 2 is the realm of situationally defined roles, stages rooted in time, relationship styles, values, attitudes, goals, and sets of expectations. Some of these may loosely derive from traits; some may operate independently (or as McAdams suggests, we can at least begin by *assuming* they operate independently). As for Level 2-type expressions in Bush, McAdams focuses on Bush's use of humor, his loyalty to his father, his decision to give up drinking, and his general life goals.

Bush was 7 when his sister Robin died. He was crushed and confused—his parents had concealed from him the seriousness of her condition, McAdams (2010) explains—but as time went on, his way of dealing with the situation revolved around humor, directed mostly at others. He worked hard to cheer people up. That was the role he adopted—with his mother particularly, but not with everyone—and it suited him, given his abundant positive affect and his talent for clowning around. What this means is that Bush (a) coped in ways that jibed with his extraversion, and (b) used specific strategies when with specific people.

Another role Bush adopted was father-protector. As a Bush, he was involved in his father's campaigns, working tirelessly on George H. W.'s behalf. His feelings about his father are fulsome. He considers him a great man, a true hero; some say he idolizes him. These attitudes turned George W. into a ferally devoted defender of George H. W. Far from detesting his father, or resenting him his success—as one might predict using clichéd Oedipal formulations—McAdams (2010) contends George W. hated his father's enemies. He took them on with tremendous zeal. How did Bush *cope* with his father running for public office? He advocated, and he became his father's champion.

Bush's "decider" side shows up in his decision around Age 40 to stop drinking. Those high in Openness might consult with others. They might study up on their condition or try psychotherapy. They might vacillate or intellectualize the problem. Bush did none of this; he showed no inclination to think things through. His wife told him he needed to stop, and he did, cold turkey.

McAdams (2010) also surveys Bush's goals as they evolved. These included making money, as Bushes usually did; performing public service, as Bushes also did; and "avenging the man he loved more than life itself"—his father—"by destroying his biggest enemy," in this case, Saddam Hussein. Goals are typically consistent with Level 1 traits, but they need not be. For instance, neurotic, shy people may pursue the goal of becoming famous. Bush's goals square with his extraversion insofar as he was going to get rich, he was going to be in the public eye via politics, and he was going to boldly vanquish those who had targeted his dad.

**Stories.** McAdams's (1995) Level 3 focuses on narratives, the stories we tell ourselves and others. Stories—or what some call "personal myths"—script, or make understandable, the observable effects of Levels 1 and 2. We watch what we say or do or feel, and then we narrate those observations. Stories are the top-down, post hoc constructions we compose as a way of explaining who we are, micro or macro theories of self.

Much of the relatively recent narrative focus in personality psychology can be traced to the Script Theory invented by Silvan Tomkins (1962, 1963). His model includes two elements exceptionally useful for organizing psychobiographical analyses. The first is the scene, a specific life event or happening amplified by strong affect. You confide to a dear friend that you are gay, and he tells you that, because of his religious beliefs, he can never speak to you again, and you feel broken and perplexed and sad: That is a scene. Life is full of scenes—disconnected boxcars of sorts, carrying affect (shame, anger, surprise, and so on). For Tomkins, affect was everything in that events lacking affect do not rise to the level of a scene—they occur, and they are forgotten, unless they package emotion (Carlson, 1988; Schultz, 2011b).

If scenes are separate boxcars sitting idly in a train yard, scripts are the train connecting similar boxcars together. Scripts combine scenes sharing affect and clustering around particular themes. They are mini master narratives that interpret, organize, and predict specific happenings. Colloquially, people refer to a "victim" script, for instance. In that way of thinking, something good turns bad. You do not get what you deserve or you feel the world is against you. Theoretically, beneath this victim script umbrella, one would discover a number of discrete incidents of victimhood: the person loses out on a job, gets dumped by a girlfriend, buys a car that is a lemon.

George W. Bush organized his life around themes of redemption (essentially, the opposite of a victim script). For the longest time—up to around the age of 40—he seemed to be going nowhere. He tried his hand at oil and failed. His service in the Air National Guard was suspiciously sporadic and undistinguished. But then, he gave up drinking—redeeming himself. He eventually was "born again"—redeeming himself. He beat heavily favored Ann Richards in the race for Governor of Texas—redeeming himself. He defeated Saddam Hussein, in the process redeeming his own father. Finally, according to McAdams's (2010) reading, Bush universalized redemption: He was the liberator of Iraq, the champion of freedom. McAdams outlines common features of redemption scripts and finds each to be easily applicable to the life of Bush: early advantage (George W. was a Bush); others suffer (the loss of sister Robin); moral steadfastness (Bush rarely wavered in his beliefs, including "I believe God wants me to run for President"); the presence of various "redemption sequences" such as those listed above; and future growth (now a man of God who had turned his life around, Bush pursued his God-mandated vocation).

These three levels interact to produce dynamic gestalts. Bush was fortified with the confidence, leadership skills, energy, ascendance, and positive feelings that accompany extraversion (Level 1); these invested his goal seeking, his motivation to excel in public service, his brashness in standing up for his father, and the emotional ballast to give up alcohol (Level 2); then these dynamisms combined led him to tell stories of redemption, in which there is liberation, freedom, positive outcomes, and good feeling (Level 3).

It is not as if the system suggested by McAdams (2005) is a sure path in psychobiography. But as an a priori organizing structure, it guarantees auspicious beginnings. The model treats the person as complex and multilayered, and it emphasizes interaction between levels and processes. Maybe most important, it is grounded in personality science. This last point is critical, because psychobiographies can only be as valid as the concepts used to make sense of the person in question (Elms, 2005). There is a universe of difference between an analysis centered on, say, penis envy, and one centered on specific adult attachment-related strategies rooted in childhood attachment styles.

## **Approach 2: Tim Kasser's Multimethodological Empiricism**

A second approach, more question centered and less devoted to predetermined theoretical structure, is exemplified by Kasser's (2013) psychobiography of John Lennon. What Kasser does is unusual (for psychobiography) but effective. He starts with one Lennon song, "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds." He first treats the song as a found object, as nearly authorless. There is little background provided on

Lennon's life—until midway through—little attempt to supply biographical context. The attitude is akin to “look what we have here.”

A number of preexisting interpretations of the song are described. Kasser (2013) alertly finds each to be problematic. One revolves around substances, and the fact that, shortly after “Lucy” appeared, fans noticed a possible drug reference: “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” spelled out L-S-D. Lennon denied this connection, claiming to know nothing about it before fans pointed it out. The song, he insisted, was inspired by his son Julian's drawing (which Julian had titled “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds”). Lennon loved the phrase, and wrote a song around it, he says.

From here, Kasser (2013) starts with the words in the song. He adopts the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) computerized system as a method of analysis. This is a purely objective approach eliminating tendentious subjective influence, as the program automatically counts percentages of words as a function of 70 preset categories. But looking at the song in isolation would be relatively meaningless. Thus, Kasser compares its LIWC characteristics with (a) Lennon songs written during the same time period, and (b) other Number One songs written by different bands or artists in the identical year. “Lucy,” Kasser finds, included comparatively unusual percentages of words denoting (a) seeing, motion, space, low certainty, and ingestion; (b) distancing (low first-person pronouns, low present-tense verbs); and (c) lack of feeling (low total affect). The latter two findings signal denial and repression of feeling, whereas the first set of findings squares with characteristics of LSD experience, despite Lennon's demurrals. Kasser does not leap to any conclusions at this point. The LIWC is a “first read,” much like McAdams's trait analysis.

Next, Kasser (2013) explores the song's story, extracting its embedded narrative structure. He asks another psychologist, Paul Siegel (a script theorist), to independently do the same, as a reliability check. The two extracted scripts turn out to be strikingly similar. Kasser's is as follows:

I am traveling > I hear the voice of a remarkable female above me > but she leaves > I follow her > I enter a vehicle that brings me up > I find myself in a new traveling place > the remarkable female is nearby but still apart from me. (Kasser, 2013, p. 29)

As it happens, this particular storyline is omnipresent. Lennon himself calls it a potent personal fantasy (the hope that a woman would appear out of the sky to save him somehow). It is the storyline of his first two songs, “Hello, Little Girl” and “I Call Your Name.” It can also be found across Lennon's body of work, from “Girl,” to “She Said, She Said,” to “Norwegian Wood,” to “Dear Prudence.” Scattered throughout Lennon's corpus are elusive, enigmatic females who are sometimes crazy-making in their capriciousness. This core script seems to have been there

from the very beginning of Lennon's songwriting, and it shows up in a number of post-“Lucy” songs as well.

Kasser (2013) then conducts a word-association analysis, isolating all the song's key signifiers—sky, diamonds, high, appear, river, girl, marmalade, and others—then locating their prior appearances in Lennon tunes. From there, he examines context of usage. For instance, from the song “Girl,” the lyric “She's the kind of girl who puts you down when friends are there” suggests a relationship that includes elements of insult. Notable broad themes from the word-usage analysis are found to include separation, love, sadness, comfort, hiding, insulting relationships (as in “Girl”), jealousy, and death. These Kasser reduces to three fundamental song attributes: loss themes, ambivalent relationships themes, and themes of concealing emotion. This last detail—concealing emotion—matches results of the LIWC analysis, which pointed to the relative lack of feeling words in “Lucy.” Together, the two separate findings imply avoidance, or a refusal to deal directly with affect.

Finally—in terms of the book's first section—Kasser (2013) dissects the song's compositional structure. Eight distinctive musical features of “Lucy” are identified. Then, just as he did with the word-association technique, Kasser searches through Lennon's corpus for other songs sharing these musical attributes: auditory-associations, in a sense. The idea is that the sounds and structures trigger procedural memories. When they recur, they also stimulate networks of association clustered around particular themes. Fascinatingly, the two songs most like “Lucy” musically turn out to be Lennon's most honest and personal, as he himself declared: “Help” (a literal declaration of desperate insecurity, written during what Lennon called his “fat” period) and “Strawberry Fields Forever” (about an orphanage across the street from where Lennon was raised). “Lucy” and these two tunes form a thematic cluster. Kasser finds connections of a lyrical sort—vulnerability, childhood abandonment—then presents these as additional pieces of the overall puzzle.

Only after conducting a mainly objective, multimethodological investigation in which the song is treated as raw data does Kasser (2013) then apply broader theory to the facts of Lennon's life. Armed with converging lines of evidence—low emotion/distancing; low first-person pronoun use (the song is all second-person); themes of loss, ambivalent relationships, and hiding; the strong possibility that the song is intensely personal, as with “Help” and “Strawberry Fields Forever”—Kasser turns his attention to the biography. What we learn is that Lennon was repeatedly abandoned. He was once even asked to choose between his parents, but that had no practical consequence, as he was raised by his aunt, Mimi. His father essentially disappeared; his mother, Julia, was intermittently available. Just as she reentered his life, when John was 16 and 17, Julia was killed in a ghastly accident: An off-duty policeman ran her over. In



Lennon's words, he felt as if he had been abandoned twice: first in the form of parental neglect, second in the form of death.

To inspect these life history details, Kasser (2013) makes use of attachment theory. What the data suggest is that Lennon was anxiously insecurely attached. His parents were not available or responsive; he was not able to turn to them for comfort or soothing. In time, Lennon evolved hyperactivating adult attachment-related strategies. He was insecure, needy, clingy, anxious. He upregulated emotion and lashed out in anger under conditions of threat. The best example of the first of these strategies—dependency and clinginess—was Lennon's relationship with Yoko Ono. He could not function without her, frequently referring to her as "mother." He insisted on their total inseparability, proclaiming, "What I say, Yoko says, and what Yoko says, I say" (Kasser, 2013). In short, the attachment was extreme but apparently neurotic.

What does all this mean for "Lucy"? It explains why Lennon would evolve a fantasy of a female in the sky set on saving him: He needed this female to feel secure. But more important, the figure of "Lucy" is a virtually literal (though disguised) symbolic representation of Julia. She cannot be counted on, and when she shows up, she promptly leaves again. Lennon never reaches her, nor she does ever save him, despite what Lennon fantasized. In effect, the song repeats trauma, recycling what he believed to be the core conflict of his life.

At the end of *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*, Kasser (2013) presents a falsifiability test:

To the extent circumstances in Lennon's life were of the sort that would maintain or increase the accessibility of painful feelings [such as those that led to the writing of "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds"] and that would weaken his typical means of coping, Lennon would be expected to continue to write songs that refer to his mother. (pp. 93–94)

Under opposite life circumstances, "a drop in references to his mother should be notable," Kasser (2013) predicts.

Kasser (2013) surveys the months following release of the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* record (on which "Lucy" appeared). Lennon was using LSD heavily, thereby weakening his defenses and increasing accessibility to normally blocked-off emotional material. The Beatles' manager Brian Epstein died, leaving Lennon shaken. Primed by these circumstances, Lennon wrote "I Am the Walrus," a song that, like "Lucy," was influenced by the "nonsense" verse of Lewis Carroll. The two compositions begin in A major, and both feature chromatically descending chords. They also include 10 of the same words: "sky," "yellow," and "waiting," among others. In light of details such as these, Kasser argues it would be likely that "kindred ideas" were activated in Lennon when he wrote each of the tunes.

Beyond this, "I Am the Walrus" includes mention of Lucy, police (it was an off-duty policeman who struck Julia, and a different policeman who informed Lennon Julia had died), and the expression of grief. Lennon writes, "Mister city policeman sitting pretty little policemen in a row/ See how they fly like Lucy in the Sky see how they run/ I'm crying/ I'm crying/ I'm crying/ I'm crying." Kasser (2013) proceeds to examine other songs written post-"Lucy"—some composed when he felt fragile, some when he felt secure—but the point is this: Kasser is able to demonstrate how his psychobiographical assessment of Lennon's personality and conflicts broadly predicts the content of his ongoing creative work.

What do McAdams (2010) and Kasser (2013) have in common? Both proceed from a solid grounding in personality science. McAdams makes use of scientifically generated findings; Kasser assesses a song scientifically. In each case there is interpretation, but it is tethered to scientific concepts and/or methods. There are differences, too. McAdams begins with an orienting theoretical structure; Kasser does not. McAdams uses theory to organize data, whereas Kasser starts with data—the song—then applies attachment models. Either orientation works, but for beginners, McAdams's approach might be most easily executed. It forces certain questions—about traits, characteristic adaptations, and stories. On the other hand, Kasser's model is extremely useful for inquiries centered on specific creative products. Say one wishes to explore the subjective origins of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy." He or she can utilize the LIWC, as did Kasser, or extract from the poem a script, or conduct a word-association analysis. Just like "Lucy," the poem can be treated as data first, with theory resorted to later.

## Evaluative Criteria

No matter the method used, all psychobiography comes down to interpretation, to the question of what makes interpretations *good*? Kasser (2013) proceeds scientifically, but in the end, he interprets the facts and findings assembled. The case is the same for McAdams (2010), who bases his explanatory structure on a three-level personality model that is used to interpret and to "read" biographical material. How are we to know if either is correct in what they say about Lennon and Bush?

A short but pungent paper has addressed this problem: Runyan's (2005) analysis of explanations for why Van Gogh cut off his left ear lobe. In it, assorted prior answers are described: emulation of Jack the Ripper, a psychotic response to auditory hallucinations, and an attempt to mobilize the attentions of his brother Theo, among others. The picture is cloudy, with several plausible possibilities coexisting, some seeming to be credible, some enormously far-fetched (for instance, the notion that the ear lobe stands fo-

a penis). The question becomes which of these is best, most true, and which lacking? The goal of Runyan's essay is to provide a means of evaluating competing interpretations of the same action. In a thick, important paragraph he outlines a few criteria, including (a) logical soundness, (b) survival of attempted falsifications, (c) consistency with available evidence, and (d) credibility compared with other explanations. These are useful gauges, but the trouble is, the criteria sometimes do not suffice. They are helpful, to be sure, but broad and occasionally inapplicable. For instance, it is rare to come across clearly logically unsound interpretations. It is also rare that psychobiographical explanations get subjected to attempted falsification. As for consistency with available evidence, most readers do not know of available evidence beyond that provided by the psychobiographer him or herself. Lastly, focusing on credibility begs the question, "What is credibility?" Also problematic is the fact of overdetermination, which Runyan accepts. Most things we do for a number of reasons combined. It is not necessary, or possible, to single out one cause alone.

To get at the question of how the interpretation process works in real instances, it is useful to focus on examples and see what they show. Schultz (2013) recently published a biography of musician Elliott Smith. In one of Smith's songs—"A Distorted Reality is Now a Necessity to Be Free"—he includes the lyric "fit poorly and arrange the sight/dollared up in virgin white." It is a vague line, the meaning unclear. Schultz hypothesized that the lyric in question had something to do with Smith's appearance at the Oscars—he had been nominated for Best Original Song, and he performed the tune "Miss Misery" in a white Prada suit. This assertion—the lyric relates to the Oscars—is an interpretation, an inference. But what makes it true? How to demonstrate its validity? In this case, happy circumstance intervened. Schultz came into possession of Smith's handwritten draft of lyrics. In these, the line "fit poorly and arrange the sight" is preceded by an earlier iteration, "fit poorly in my Prada white," later crossed out and revised. Here, by way of serendipity, inference is strongly supported by a later discovery of *fact*. It started as an educated guess, but evidence made it near indisputable.

Consider another example. One of the more famous 20th-century literary characters is Truman Capote's Holly Golightly, from his novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. From the moment the book appeared, a chief question seemed to be who Holly was based on (Schultz, 2011b). What was her source in real life? Holly is self-absorbed, flighty, unreachable. She cannot be loved or possessed. The male main character is obsessed with her, but he cannot get as close to her as he wants. At first, nothing salient leaps out from the text, but details start accreting. She is a social climber who reads all the movie star magazines. She is a drinker, a "headcase" prone to violent tantrums. Both her parents died when she was young, and she was sent away to live with

various "mean people" in the South. She married at a very young age and the marriage ended disastrously. Her real name, before she transmogrified into Holly Golightly, was "Lulamae." This last set of facts, especially the final one on the subject of her name, makes the case. All perfectly fit Capote's crazy-making, unreachable, unlovable mother, whose real name (a similarity difficult to dismiss) was Lillie Mae. Here the decisive element is not some fortunate factual discovery but more the *goodness of fit* between the character and a real-life person. The degree of alignment exceeds chance.

One final example. When John Lennon wrote his song "Mother," he was inspired by a recent immersion in Irving Janov's primal scream therapy. He had gone to Los Angeles to practice it as a means of overcoming untreatable grief. "Mother," unlike "Lucy," is direct, explicit, and simple: "Mother, you had me/ But I never had you/ I wanted you/ You didn't want me." At its finish, Lennon screams over and over "Momma don't go/ Daddy come home." Here, the art served a psychological *function*: to move beyond pain. That was Lennon's aim in writing and performing it—as he stated himself.

In many cases, the effectiveness of interpretations in psychobiography reduces to a combination of these three intertwined elements: fact, goodness-of-fit, and function. They are not criteria by which to judge, although they overlap with Runyan's (2005) prescriptions. More so, they represent *attributes* of psychobiographies that tend to be successful. The work is solidly confirmed by *fact*. Evidence is closely tied to or, in aggregate, converges on, interpretations. It reveals a clear and cogent *goodness of fit* between facts and interpretations: Holly seems to suggest Truman Capote's mother in light of a heterogeneous confluence of life history details. And it includes an analysis of psychological *function*—what the person in question got out of what they did, what his or her goals were, conscious or unconscious. (It was Lennon himself who said he wrote "Mother" inspired by Janov's ideas and practices.) The goodness-of-fit component requires creative perception, the identification of salient congruities. The function component refers to motive, the question of why. Notice how it is chiefly the function portion of interpretation that requires application of psychological knowledge. It is at the function level that one might discuss attachment, or life stories, or traits. The function level, then, is the most "psychological" portion of psychobiography. The fact level involves a different sort of expertise—deep awareness of the details of a subject's life, familiarity with or access to sources. The goodness-of-fit level is mostly about creative perception. One must see things in the evidence—patterns, identities, repetitions, and congruities and incongruities. At any of these three levels, a psychobiography may falter.

It is also possible to delineate *proscriptive* guidelines for psychobiography, or what *not* to do (Runyan, 1984; Schultz,

2005). Excessive reductionism is one such warning sign. Reasons for actions tend to come in clusters, so advancing one reason alone is insufficient, an oversimplification. One should beware and/or avoid the inverted pyramid design in psychobiography, according to which farragoes of action get traced back to one ostensibly potent point. Far better that every *single* action gets traced back to *multiple* motivational units. Some psychobiographers also seem content with simple diagnosis. But diagnoses are purely descriptive entities, their job being to simplify, to stand for sets of thoughts, feelings, and actions. They can never be adequately explanatory, and using them in an explicitly explanatory fashion is specious.

One final proscriptive guideline has been touched on already: theory selection. As suggested before, psychobiographies are only as credible as the theory, or theories, on which they are based. One tactic, favored by psychologists of a Jungian stripe, is to search out possible archetypal material in creative works, and to connect artistic products with functions emanating from the so-called collective unconscious. The trouble is, this model lacks scientific support. Are archetypes real? Is there such a thing as the collective unconscious? We do not know. Because Jungian ideas, for the most part, lack any acceptable degree of scientific support, they ought to be avoided in psychobiographical research. The same point can be made about other theories consensually regarded as dubious.

### Summary and Conclusions

Psychobiography is best understood as a branch of applied personality science, in which theories and findings are utilized to make effective sense of real, lived lives. The focus is on the individual rather than large groups of anonymous subjects. The goal is to explore the subjective origins of public acts, whether the creation of a work of art or theory, or the articulation of a set of political beliefs. At its modern inception, psychobiography was excessively influenced by psychoanalytic theorizing. Today, most psychobiographers are not Freudian or even broadly psychoanalytic. Theory choice is more eclectic, governed by considerations related to scientific merit. One of the most common questions about psychobiography pertains to method, or "how to" do it. McAdams (2010) and Kasser (2013) represent two models exemplifying the kind of careful, informed, rigorous analysis that will, in time, move the field forward.

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