

Psychobiographical Perspectives on the Development and Manifestation of Extraordinary Human Achievements

Inaugural Lecture

presented by

Prof Roelf van Niekerk

Director: School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resources

21st October 2021

1. Introduction

Psychobiographical research involves the systematic application of psychological theory to biographical data. In its simplest form, psychobiographical research incorporates at least three elements:

- a. a life story of an extraordinary individual;
- b. an analysis of contextual factors, developmental processes, and accomplishments; and
- c. a theoretical interpretation of the life story (Van Niekerk, Perry, & Fouché, 2016).

Psychobiographical research has several characteristic features. Firstly, it is an interdisciplinary approach that uses contributions and perspectives from several scientific disciplines (for example, business science, economics, psychology, political science) and the humanities (for example, history, philosophy, sociology, and religion/spirituality). Secondly, it typically approaches life stories from a longitudinal perspective. Thirdly, psychobiographical research comprises in-depth studies of extraordinary individuals in the contexts in which they made their contributions. Fourthly, psychobiographical research does not afford anonymity or

confidentiality to participants. Instead, it requires that profiled leaders be identified by name. Fifthly, psychobiographical profiling employs indirect methods to analyse the development or characteristics of individuals. Usually, extensive use is made of biographical material available in the public domain and originally compiled by biographers, journalists, or researchers. This material is not collected primarily to solve a scientific problem, but rather to answer questions and describe phenomena that are inherently important, particularly from psychological and historical perspectives. Lastly, psychobiographical research often focuses on completed lives (Van Niekerk, 2007).

Essentially, psychobiographical researchers are storytellers who highlight interesting and important aspects of the life stories of extraordinary individuals. Stories come in many forms and their entertainment value is readily acknowledged. But stories are not only for entertainment. They also inform, educate, enlighten, and inspire. Currently, the narrative, storytelling approach is very popular in a number of disciplines, such as education, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology. Not surprisingly, storytelling has also infiltrated the organisational and business world in recent decades. In a sense, stories have become a cornerstone of organisational life. Storytelling appears in different forms and plays important roles, particularly in programmes aimed at education, training, development, motivation, empowerment and marketing. In such programmes, emerging leaders are often invited to analyse case studies; identify key challenges and motives; debate issues and situations from multiple perspectives; reconcile the interests of different stakeholders; develop appropriate strategies; and share relevant personal experiences.

Two distinct disciplines are represented in the term psychobiography: psychology and biography. Both psychologists and biographers are interested in life stories and life history, and utilize biographical data (i.e., diaries, letters, autobiographies, biographies, photographs, journals, and anecdotes) in their research (Roberts, 2002). However, the two disciplines differ in the extent to which psychological theory is used during the interpretation of biographical data.

Psychology is a scientific discipline that traditionally emphasises empirical proof, as well as the use of conceptual models to describe behaviour and development (Howe, 1997). Biography is a more subjective and intuitive approach that emphasises the uniqueness of individuals, rather than the commonalities amongst them (Van Niekerk, 2007). Furthermore, biography denotes a more intuitive and literary approach. The alliance between biography and psychology, based on their common interest in biographical data, benefits both disciplines. Psychobiographers agree that psychology improves biography as much as biography improves psychology (Jolly, 2001). However, because of the different methods employed, the relationship between psychology and biography is also characterised by a degree of tension and uneasiness (Elms, 1994).

2. Aim of Inaugural Lecture

The aim of this inaugural lecture is to review past achievements, current challenges, and future opportunities relating to psychobiographical research. Data from a number of completed studies will be employed to illustrate important findings, principles, and unresolved dilemma's.

3. Illustrative Anecdotes

Before a more detailed description of psychobiographical research is provided, consider the following anecdotes that describe the life experiences of eight prominent leaders. Do you recognise them?

3.1 Anecdote 1 – Early encounter with death

Elizabeth grew up in Switzerland. She loved nature and had a number of pets, including a dozen bunnies. One day her father asked her mother to prepare a rabbit roast for dinner. He then ask Elizabeth to take one of her bunnies to the butcher on the way to school and bring it home during the lunch break. Elizabeth was rendered speechless by her father’s request, but obeyed. This drama repeated itself until there was only one rabbit left: Blackie, Elizabeth’s favourite. Elizabeth described him as a good listener, a wonderful friend, and the only living creature who loved her unconditionally. On the day Elizabeth dreaded her father asked her to take Blackie to the butcher. Elizabeth told Blackie what she had been ordered to do and encouraged him to run away. But, Blackie did not budge. School was about to start. As Elizabeth ran out of time, she picked Blackie up, ran to the butcher shop, and handed him to the butcher. She spent the rest of the day thinking about Blackie. She wondered if he had been slaughtered already, if he knew that she loved him, and that she would miss him forever. She regretted not having said goodbye to Blackie. Elizabeth was distraught and angry. That evening when her father complimented her mother on the delicious meal Elizabeth told herself, “If you can make it through this, then you can make it through anything in life” (Kubler-Ross, 1997, p.39).

Anecdote 1 describes a childhood experience of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who attracted international attention when she proposed the *Five Stages of Grief* (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). She conducted extensive work with dying individuals, wrote the best-selling book *On Death and Dying* (1970), helped to establish the *Hospice Care* movement, assisted thousands terminally ill individuals to face and accept death, and conducted ground-breaking research on near-death experiences.

Approximately 70 years after her initial encounter with death, Kubler-Ross had achieved the following:

- Listed as one of the Time Magazine's *100 Most Important Thinkers* of the 20th Century;
- Recipient of 19 honorary degrees;
- Voted as the United States *1977 Woman of the Year*;
- Author of 20 Books published in 42 languages;
- One of her books, *On death and dying*, listed as one of the New York Public Library's 100 Books of the Century;
- Taught 125,000 students across the world.

3.2 Anecdote 2 - Death of siblings and retrenchment

This extraordinary South African pioneer was the third of five children. His parents lost two children through death before his birth: one died as a result of a congenital heart disease, while the other died at birth. Although this individual lost his first job while he was in his early thirties (with two young children) due to *irreconcilable differences* with colleagues, he achieved international prominence at the age of 45 years.

Anecdote 2 describes a segment of the life story of Professor Chris Barnard who attracted international attention when he transplanted the first human heart in 1967 (Mayer & Van Niekerk, 2020; Van Niekerk, 2007; Van Niekerk, Vos, & Fouché, 2015). He made several pioneering contributions to the field of medicine, particularly the treatment of heart disease. Barnard's achievements include the following:

- Performed the first kidney transplant in South Africa;
- Performed nine heart transplant operations (involved in a further 156 transplant operations);
- Performed one heart-lung transplant;
- Performed 49 heterotopic heart transplants (where the malfunctioning heart is left inside the body to act as an auxiliary pump);
- Received recognition for his pioneering contributions to organ transplantation from 60 countries in the form of 15 honorary doctorates, 18 honorary

memberships, 133 medals, 223 diplomas and certificates, and 111 plaques (Van Niekerk, 2007).

3.3 Anecdote 3 - Poverty, polio, TB, and difficulty to establish a career

This popular South African was born to a poor family, diagnosed with polio in the first year of his life, and on an occasion hospitalised with serious burns. The polio left him with an atrophied right hand and forced him to write with his left hand. At the age of 14 years, he contracted tuberculosis and had to spend 22 months at the Rietvlei Sanatorium. During his teenage years, he dreamt of becoming a medical doctor, but lacked finances to pursue this dream. Later, he qualified as a teacher, but he did not enjoy being a teacher at all and promptly resigned from his first teaching job.

Anecdote 3 describes the childhood and adolescent experiences of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Eliastam, 2011). Tutu's achievements include the following:

- General-Secretary of the South African Council of Churches;
- Archbishop of Cape Town;
- Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and
- Recipient of several awards, including the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanism, Sydney Peace Prize, Gandhi Peace Prize, the United States Presidential Medal of Freedom, as well as the Nobel Peace Prize.

3.4 Anecdote 4 - Parental divorce and retrenchment

This prominent South African business leader's parents divorced when he was seven years old. He was placed in the custody of his father, an unusual legal arrangement in the 1930s. He received the *Outstanding Young South African Award* in 1965 (which he shared with Gary Player). A year later his father - a director in the business where he was employed - died. Shortly after his father died, the remaining directors requested

him to leave the business. He survived the retrenchment, re-established his career, and soon emerged as one of South Africa's leading business leaders.

Anecdote 4 describes the early life and career of Raymond Ackermann who founded Pick n Pay in 1967 (Van Niekerk & Fouché, 2014). Currently, Pick n Pay operates in more than 1,600 locations across seven countries in Southern Africa and employs more than 85 000 people.

Anecdote 4 brings to mind the similar - to a certain extent - life story of another prominent and contemporary South African business leader, Jannie Mouton, the founder of PSG (Mouton & Maas, 2014). Mouton qualified as a chartered accountant in 1973. Twenty-two years later Mouton was fired as managing partner by stockbrokers *Senekal, Mouton & Kitshoff*, a firm he co-founded. Like Ackermann, Mouton survived the retrenchment, re-established his career and founded one of South Africa's most successful investment companies.

3.5 Anecdote 5 - Poverty, parental illness, death, and scholastic problems

The family of this extraordinary South African leader lived with their elderly and frail grandparents because her sickly mother could not perform household tasks. At an early age X had to take over most of the domestic responsibilities. Her primary school career was interrupted when she was required to become the primary care giver of her six month old sister. Two years later she managed to return to school. Her father suffered from a chronic lung disease and died when she was 15 years old. On his deathbed her father requested that X takes care of the younger siblings (aged 12, 10, 6, and 4). The family had no money to provide for X's secondary/high school career. However, she entered a competition that required the completion of a test. To the delight of her family and village, X scored the highest marks and won a four year scholarship to attend high school. When the award panel learned that X was two years older than her classmates they promptly disqualified her and awarded the scholarship

to another learner. Fortunately, the local mission heard about X's dilemma and arranged an equivalent scholarship for her at a prestigious boarding school.

Anecdote 5 describes the difficult early experiences of Albertina Sisulu, (1918-2011), an extraordinary South African anti-apartheid activist, and the wife of Walter Sisulu, the former Secretary-General and Deputy President of the African National Congress (ANC) (Mayer, Van Niekerk, & Fouché, In press; Sisulu, 2003). While Walter spent 25 years in prison alongside Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, Albertina who was a nurse and community activist, became one of the high-profile anti-apartheid resistance leaders in South Africa (South African Government, 2018; Walker, 1991). She raised their five children as well as three foster children, spent months in jail (often in solitary confinement). On several occasions the Apartheid government also imposed restrictions on her freedom of movement (SAHO, 2020). Albertina is referred to as the *Mother of the Nation* due to the exceptional leadership qualities as well as her ability to mentor and take care of others. Throughout her life, she tirelessly focused on the needs, interests and well-being of her family as well as fellow anti-apartheid struggle-compatriots (Earl, 2011).

3.6 Anecdote 6 – Abandonment, identity and adjustment issues

The last illustrative anecdote focuses on an international business leader. Following his death, a panel of leadership experts cautioned young leaders not to try to emulate X's style. They stated: *"If you do and do not possess his personality, you will have problems. None of our theories encompass X"*. The panel urged those involved in leadership research to consider revising the existing theories to ensure that provision is made for the distinctive behaviours and contributions of leaders such as X. X had an atypical childhood. Soon after his birth his parents gave him up for adoption. During his earlier life, X experienced intense feelings of abandonment relating to his adoption. He experienced adjustment problems at school. He felt bored, passed time by playing pranks, and had ongoing problems with authority figures. Furthermore, his adopted family lived in a violent neighbourhood where X was the frequent victim of bullying

behaviour. X became a loner during his teenage years. He later gave his parents an ultimatum to move him to a different school. During his university years, X became part of the hippy culture, abused substances, and eventually dropped out of university.

Anecdote 6 describes the personal development of Steven Paul Jobs (1955-2011), an extraordinary American business leader; chairman, CEO, and co-founder of Apple; chairman of Pixar; member of The Walt Disney Company's board of directors; and the founder, chairman, and CEO of NeXT. Jobs is recognised as a pioneer of the personal computer revolution during the 1970-1980s, along with his early business partner and fellow Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak (Fouché, Du Plessis, & Van Niekerk, 2017; Ndoro, 2013; Ndoro & Van Niekerk, 2019). Jobs contributed to the radical transformation of at least seven industries: personal computing, animated motion pictures, music, mobile phones, tablet computing, retail stores, and digital publishing. Jobs was clearly a highly successful leader. But, his autocratic leadership style attracted considerable attention and scrutiny from leadership experts.

We recently completed a fascinating study on another extraordinary autocratic leader, Ferdinand Piëch (Mayer, Van Niekerk, & Wannenburg, 2021). Several factors contributed to Piëch's fascinating and enigmatic personality. The *dark side* of his personality had many facets. Firstly, the data indicated that Piëch (who suffered from dyslexia at a time when teachers did not know that it existed) was an impatient, intolerant, demanding, and ruthless individual who trusted no one at work. In fact, he had limited desire for close, harmonious relationships. Secondly, he was a self-centred individual who exhibited a lack of empathy and an indifference to the well-being of others. He viewed employees as expendable and dismissed them when they appeared incompetent, when they questioned or opposed him, or when they failed to meet his demanding standards. Thirdly, he lacked social and communication skills and as a result he brought considerable awkwardness to interpersonal situations. Fourthly, Piëch was notoriously unfriendly, rude, hostile, aggressive, cold-blooded,

demanding, and bad tempered. His emotional outbursts achieved legendary status and he sustained conflicts with relatives or stakeholders for decades. Fifthly, Piëch viewed himself above the rules of social living. In fact, he held traditional or conventional morals and rules in contempt. As a result, he never showed signs of shame, regret, guilt, or remorse. Lastly, Piëch had an arsenal of manipulative tactics at his disposal. These included fear, intimidation, domination, exploitation, threats, and ruthlessness. He also demonstrated considerable skill in spreading rumours or using networks to achieve the outcomes he desired.

Several extraordinary characteristics balanced the dark side of his personality. Firstly, Piëch enjoyed challenges and mastering difficult situations and problems. He was able to take charge, make things happen, and modify his environment even in times of crisis. Secondly, he was very competitive and enjoyed measuring himself against siblings, cousins, and opposition companies. In addition, he knew how to use competitiveness to improve teamwork and standards. Thirdly, Piëch was very focussed. He formulated clear goals, designed detailed strategies, and knew exactly what he wanted to achieve. He publicly asserted his belief that the achievement of a goal is far more important than the needs of those involved. Fourthly, he was risk-tolerant. He enjoyed innovation and was keen to push boundaries. In addition, he was willing to undertake huge projects without fear of failure. Fifthly, Piëch adopted a meticulous approach that combined vision with attention to detail. He obsessed about goals, production processes, quality, and maintained perfectionistic standards. When encountering inefficiency or incompetence, he became brutally demanding and confrontational. Sixthly, he employed a strong and controlling style to lead and wield power. He was an exceptionally talented manager who could persuade more than 6,000 employees to work towards the achievement of a common goal. Despite being a feared and very controversial manager, he was successful in evoking obedience and respect from subordinates. In fact, it seemed as if he gained considerable satisfaction from dictating and manipulating others. The above characteristics contributed significantly to his exceptionally effective leadership in times of crisis as well as his success in a volatile and highly competitive industry.

Piech led Volkswagen for two decades that had been characterised by extraordinary success, but also by reputational damage to the Volkswagen brand. This contributed to the complicated legacy Piëch left. He rescued Volkswagen from a financial crisis and turned it into a large conglomerate comprising no less than 13 automotive brands and the world's biggest manufacturer of motor cars. This achievement was due to his engineering brilliance; personal involvement in vehicle development; strong and clear direction; unwavering commitment to excellence; an obsession with manufacturing excellent cars; competitiveness; a growth-strategy based on the expansion of model ranges, acquisitions, and internationalisation; and a visionary entrepreneurial outlook.

The above anecdotes highlight some of the early experiences of a range of extraordinary individuals. The anecdotes raise a number of issues, for example, how did the experiences described above influence their lives, careers, success, and specific leadership style.

The anecdotes are presented for illustrative purposes only. I want to emphasise two points here.

Firstly, the anecdotes do not suggest that psychobiographers rely on one or a few childhood experiences when they interpret the development of extraordinariness later in life. In fact, psychobiographers avoid *reductionism*, that is the tendency to explain adult behaviour exclusively in the light of early developmental processes and influences, the overemphasis of psychological factors at the expense of social, cultural and historical influences, or the overemphasis of psychopathology and the neglect of health and creativity, as well as (Du Plessis, 2017; Perry, 2012).

Secondly, the anecdotes do not suggest that adversity and hardship are requirements for the development of extraordinariness later in life. Many extraordinary individuals had childhoods that were free from traumatic experiences. We remain unsure whether

adversity in childhood or adolescence plays a role in the development of extraordinariness. Or, whether extraordinariness merely develops despite the adversity experienced by some children and adolescents. However, in our studies to date, we found a large number of fascinating examples of extraordinary individuals who had a particularly hard time in their early development. The anecdotes confirm these interesting and noteworthy findings and we will continue to investigate the complex mechanisms at play here.

4. Psychobiographical Research: Definition and Description

Psychobiographical research represents systematic and detailed studies of extraordinary, distinguished, famous, exemplary, illustrious or enigmatic individuals in their socio-historical contexts and within psychological frames of reference. In some cases, psychobiographers focus on lives that are contentious or notorious. However, such studies are outnumbered by those that focus on psychological strengths and human potential. The objective of psychobiographical research is to transform life stories into coherent and illuminating stories (McAdams, 2006). Usually, the aim is “to discern, discover or formulate the central story of the entire life, a story structured according to psychological theory” (McAdams, 1994, p.12).

Psychobiographical research allows for the exploration, description and interpretation of both overt and covert aspects of life stories, including private motives and hypothesised causes of behaviour. The ultimate aim is to discover the core themes in the life stories of exemplary individuals. In the process, life stories are transformed into informative narratives, and the circumstances and qualities that set exceptional individuals apart from others are highlighted.

A purposive sampling approach is typically employed to identify leaders for study. In other words, psychobiographers use their judgment to select individuals who best meet the purposes of particular investigations. Psychobiographical subjects are

usually chosen on the basis of the interest value, uniqueness and significance of their lives. If the subjects are not contemporaries care should be taken by psychobiographers to formulate interpretations aligned with the historical and socio-cultural circumstances that prevailed at the time.

A large amount of information is usually available on extraordinary individuals. The collection of material therefore presents psychobiographers with a considerable challenge. Psychobiographers collect biographical data from primary or first-person sources (for example, diaries, autobiographies, letters, interviews) as well as secondary sources produced by others that are available in the public domain (for example, biographies, newspaper and magazine articles, Internet documents).

Some researchers are reluctant to acknowledge the usefulness of documentary data (Scott, 2006). However, documents are valued by psychobiographers because of their stability (they can be analysed repeatedly) and convenience (they are freely available). Documents are also useful for validating the accuracy of material obtained from other sources. Psychobiographers acknowledge that documents may be influenced by author bias and therefore they deem it necessary to review multiple documents to minimise the impact of bias and enhance the credibility of the biographical material. Importantly, psychobiographers should co-operate with researchers from disciplines such as history, literature, management, and political science, who also employ biographical material.

5. Psychobiographical Research: Development

Approximately a century ago, psychobiographical research was introduced to the discipline of psychology by Sigmund Freud. Although earlier informal applications of psychology in biographies have been documented, Freud established psychobiography with the publication of an influential publication entitled *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* in 1910. This study is credited as being the first

formal or scientific psychobiography. In it, Freud provided a set of methodological guidelines. For example, he urged profilers to base conclusions on adequate biographical material, investigate the validity of biographical anecdotes, compare life stories with the behaviour of contemporaries, and resist attaching value to isolated acts, events, and circumstances. Freud also completed psychobiographies on historical figures such as Moses and Dostoyevsky.

Psychobiographical research also benefited from the development of the case method at Harvard University a century ago (McNair, 1954). At the time, the case method represented a step forward in making business education more relevant and interactive. Since then, exploration of real-life problems and case studies have taken up increased time in business education and leadership development. Case studies, in particular, are now widely employed to bring the realities of complex business and leadership issues into training and development situations. They offer leaders opportunities to immerse themselves in decision-making processes and extrapolate from case studies to the realities they face. Business school cases tend to highlight the best practices in organisations. Here, psychobiographical profiling takes a different stand. Profilers believe that it is in the interests of science and learning to analyse and highlight both exemplary and unsuccessful behaviours and outcomes.

Since the publication of the first formal psychobiography, it has not only developed into an established method and research genre, but has also gained international interest and support. Psychobiography has also spread across psychological sub-disciplines, to the extent that Kovary (2011) refers to a *renaissance* of psychobiography, and refer to psychobiography as a mainstay in psychological enquiry. In-depth profiles of extraordinary individuals are becoming more common. Psychobiographical profiling also extends beyond academic use and application. For example, it is noteworthy that the United States Central Intelligence Agency employs psychobiographical profilers to produce data (Van Niekerk, Perry, & Fouché, 2016).

In South Africa the development of psychobiographical research lagged behind the progress made in Europe and the United States. The first psychobiographical case study of an extraordinary South African was published in 1939. Only seven South African psychobiographies had been completed in the 20th century. These studies focused on the extraordinary contributions of Ingrid Jonker (van der Merwe, 1978), Cornelis Langenhoven (Burgers, 1939), Louis Leipoldt (Burgers, 1960), Eskia Mphahlele (Manganyi, 1983) Anton Rupert (Crous, 1999), Gerard Sekoto (Manganyi, 1996), and Jan Smuts (Fouché, 1999).

In the late 1990s, a colleague (Professor Paul Fouché, currently from the University of the Free State) and I decided to establish a psychobiographical research project at the University of Port Elizabeth. Later, researchers at the Universities of the Free State, Fort Hare, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Rhodes, and UNISA established similar projects. Since then, the number of especially academic psychobiographies has increased significantly. To date, more than 150 academic psychobiographies have been completed at South African universities. Psychobiographical research has indeed developed into a vibrant and popular area of research and gained considerable national and international interest.

6. Psychobiographical Research: Benefits

Psychobiographical research adds considerable value to psychological research. The benefits include the following:

- a. Contribution to the historical record of extraordinary lives;
- b. Improvement of the psychological understanding of extraordinariness;
- c. Recognition of the role played in history by extraordinary individuals;

- d. Reinterpretation of the contributions of extraordinary individuals, especially individuals who may be viewed as controversial;
- e. Promotion of the value of in-depth, longitudinal and holistic psychological studies of individuals that incorporate contextual, environmental, and socio-cultural perspectives;
- a. Emphasis on behaviour patterns and competencies that develop over extended periods of time (This serves as a reminder that although cross-sectional research on the behaviours and characteristics of extraordinary individuals are important, some processes should also be studied longitudinally to reflect life events as they unfold over time);
- f. Promotion of inter-disciplinarity and integration of perspectives from different scientific disciplines (e.g., business science, economics, psychology, political science, and sports science) and the humanities (e.g., art, history, philosophy, sociology, and spirituality/religion);
- g. Development and refinement of psychological theories.

The completed psychobiographies suggest that several of the theoretical frameworks (e.g., career, leadership, and personality) used to interpret life stories require considerable revision because they fail to accurately describe the characteristics, experiences, and developmental trajectories of extraordinary individuals.

The value of psychobiographical research for theory development and refinement is very important. A major benefit of psychobiographical research is that it provides a valuable method for evaluating the accuracy, comprehensiveness, utility and applicability of existing theoretical frameworks. Individual life stories are ideally equipped to investigate existing theoretical frameworks through the confirmation or refutation of constructs. Here, the term analytical generalisation is important (Yin, 2018). This type of generalisation occurs when a particular set of findings is generalised to a theoretical framework. Psychobiographical research challenge theorists to analyse the relevant frameworks, add new propositions and hypotheses, and ultimately conceptualise extraordinariness in a coherent and meaningful way.

Essentially, theorists have to determine how new information fits with existing frameworks, how it is similar and different to what is known, and how frameworks should be revised.

In terms of leadership development, psychobiographical research aspires to inform (transmit knowledge), engage (capture attention), and inspire (motivate). It appeals to three levels of learning, namely thinking, feeling, and action. Individuals learn quickly in situations that are relevant and true to life. If they are assisted in connecting learning experiences to their personal lives, they learn in ways that are relevant. New experiences are linked to existing ones and to their constructions of the world. Therefore, learning situations that resonate with previous experiences and/or are relevant to the current situation are more likely to promote engagement and embedding of learning.

It should be clear by now that psychobiographies are effective development tools. Psychobiographical profiles increase awareness and understanding of leadership behaviours, skills, styles, or underlying theories. They help individuals to understand the qualities or circumstances that set leaders apart from their ordinary counterparts; demonstrate how leadership develops; and allow emerging leaders to identify the value that psychobiographies holds for their own leadership journeys. By using psychobiographies to analyse decisions, actions, circumstances, or interventions that promoted performance or enhanced leadership, emerging leaders may be helped to understand important leadership lessons. Also, by highlighting particular concepts or principles in a psychobiography, trainers may provide new perspectives on the lives of profiled leaders. When emerging leaders find content in psychobiographies that resonates with their own experiences, beliefs, values, preferences, or goals, they will be more open to learning.

7. Psychobiographical Research: Critique

Despite the increased popularity of psychobiographical research, it continues to attract mixed reactions and reviews. **The most important criticisms and methodological challenges are outlined in this section.** It is important to note that although the amount of criticism has decreased in recent years, psychobiographical profilers heed the criticism and remain aware of the shortcomings and limitations of their approach. They recognise that psychobiographical research is merely one of the tools and not a standalone answer to important questions relating to extraordinariness. They also acknowledge that psychobiographical research is unable to fully capture the complexity of extraordinariness.

However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of psychobiographical research for generating knowledge that cannot be acquired through other approaches. Thus, psychobiographers confidently offer their interpretations as complementary to existing ones, and maintain that psychobiographies have the potential to make an important and meaningful contribution to the study of extraordinariness. The following characteristics of psychobiographical research receive most criticism: contact between psychobiographers and subjects, reductionism, insufficient consideration of social and historical context, and biased interpretations (Van Niekerk, et al., 2016).

7.1 Contact between profilers and leaders

Psychobiographical researchers typically have no personal contact with, or direct knowledge of, leaders. This limits the opportunity to verify biographical material or interpretations. However, it must be noted that there are also several advantages to studying the life stories of absent subjects. These include the range of data sources collected and analysed by profilers, the opportunity to collect biographical material across the lifespan resulting in a balanced description on a broader scope of behaviour,

and the opportunity to retrospectively analyse the intended and unintended consequences of behaviour.

7.2 Reductionism

Psychobiographical researchers are often accused of being reductionistic, in other words, of using inadequate data to interpret complex phenomena or processes (also see section 3.6). Psychobiographers acknowledge the risk of approaching life history material in a restricted, narrow-minded, or formulaic manner. They value methodological rigour and follow widely accepted guidelines to counter reductionism.

7.3 Context

One of the difficult challenges facing profilers is giving sufficient consideration to biographical material as well as the socio-historical contexts, including cultural, economic, historical, political and social factors. Psychobiographers often study the life stories of historical leaders, or leaders from different cultures. This adds complexity to the task of psychobiographers, and emphasises the importance of in-depth engagement with several types of data.

7.4 Bias

The manner in which psychobiographical researchers select subjects and the amount of time spent with single life stories make it very difficult for psychobiographers to remain objective throughout the project. Prolonged and in-depth engagement with biographical and contextual data challenges psychobiographers to remain open-minded, impartial and to employ systematic methods to collect, order, and interpret the vast amount of material. Admittedly, some researchers may be tempted to omit material that contradicts their theoretical preferences or preliminary interpretations. Such omission undermines the accuracy and objectivity of the psychobiography and will inevitably compromise its credibility.

8. Psychobiographical Research: Challenges

Despite the remarkable growth of psychobiographical research, the study of extraordinariness remains controversial. There are several reasons for this. This may in the first place relate to the fascinating love-hate relationship that exist between people and the extraordinary individuals in their midst. It appears that extraordinary individuals are – ironically – both admired and loathed at the same time. Howard Gardner, best known for his theory on multiple intelligences, described this paradox as follows: “*Even as we esteem our heroes, we mortals equally love to denigrate them*” (Gardner, 1977, p.3).

Psychobiographical researchers face several challenges. I remember the struggle – during the early 1990s – to introduce qualitative research, more specifically case study research into a department that has up to that time focused exclusively on quantitative research. Although most researchers and academic departments now embrace both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and designs, some researchers are still suspicious of the term *psychobiographical research*. Some editors of journals that accept submissions based on qualitative research, reject psychobiographical articles even before the review process. Interestingly, if the design of the same article is described as a case study, the reaction of the editors is often different. A related challenge relates to the particular research design of psychobiographical research. Some researchers view case study research as inferior and less rigorous.

Psychobiographies do not afford anonymity or confidentiality to research subjects or participants. Instead, they require that subjects be identified by name. This requirement causes considerable ethical complexities. Furthermore, reviewers are often suspicious of the data collection procedures employed by psychobiographers who make extensive use of biographical material available in the public domain and originally recorded by biographers, journalists, or other researchers. In highly

politicised contexts such as South Africa, psychobiographers who study particular political or business leaders may also encounter unfortunate resistance and inappropriate criticism.

In South Africa, the teaching of history has often been controversial. This has implications for psychobiographical research. I found that in the last 25 years the history knowledge of students (including post-graduate students) has deteriorated significantly. Students often have no knowledge of individuals who played an important role in the history of South Africa.

Regrettably, the disappointing behaviour of both national and international leaders in several contexts (e.g., business, politics, religion, sport) has negative implications for psychobiographical research. The behaviour of leaders that derail attracts considerable attention in the media. Consequently, many students have limited or no interest in the behaviour or characteristics of prominent leaders. In fact, some are unapologetically suspicious of leaders in general.

9. Psychobiographical research: Development of extraordinariness

How does extraordinariness develop? What are the conditions, experiences, and personality characteristics that are likely to facilitate or promote the actualisation of potential? My impression is that many people who are also grappling with these questions emphasise the role of academic training and achievement, versatility or multi-talented resourcefulness, a stable family and social background, as well as personality characteristics such as self-confidence, assertiveness, balance, maturity, and a degree of social status or popularity.

I will present three existing propositions from the sub-discipline personality psychology (for a more detailed discussion, see Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 2008).

Alfred Adler (1870-1937) proposed that the essential quest of individuals is to overcome their inferiorities and to strive for superiority and perfection. Adler regarded the active-constructive lifestyle as the most appropriate for achieving the basic human goals of superiority and perfection. According to Adler this type of lifestyle usually develops in a family atmosphere where the predominant spirit is one of cooperation, trust, and respect. It is marked by optimism and a positive, supportive, community-oriented approach to problem solving.

Erik Erikson's (1902-1980) description of optimal development includes the following personality traits: trust and hope, will-power, goal-directedness, competence, reliability, love, care, and wisdom.

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) collected biographical data from a group of well-known individuals that he regarded as self-actualisers and proposed no less than 15 characteristics. They are:

- Accurate observation of reality;
- Self-acceptance, acceptance of others and human nature;
- Spontaneity, simplicity and naturalness;
- Task involvement;
- Exclusiveness, the need for privacy;
- Autonomy, independence of culture and environment;
- Consistent renewal of appreciation;
- Peak experiences (moments of intense excitement);
- Social feeling or a concern for mankind;
- Deep and intense interpersonal relationships;
- Democratic character structure;
- Discrimination between means and goals, as well as between good and evil;
- Philosophical, benevolent sense of humour;
- Creativity, originality, or ingenuity;
- Resistance against enculturation;

Although psychobiographical studies confirm some of these propositions, most of them reflect an overly optimistic view of development. Psychobiographical studies suggest that these propositions should be supplemented by propositions that reflect a less idealistic view. Furthermore, the completed psychobiographies suggest that several of the theoretical frameworks (e.g., career, leadership, and personality) used to interpret life stories require considerable revision because they fail to accurately describe the characteristics, experiences, and developmental trajectories of extraordinary individuals. For example, the contribution of challenging experiences to the development of extraordinary achievement is rarely incorporated in theoretical frameworks.

The completed psychobiographical studies suggest a higher than expected prevalence of the following characteristics and experiences:

- Experiences related to insecurity, inferiority, or identity confusion;
- Relationship problems, for example isolation, loneliness, and problems with authority;
- Emotional problems, for example anxiety, depression, resentment, and jealousy;
- Family problems, including for example parental incompetence, sibling rivalry, and feelings of rejection;
- Experiences relating to ill health or disability;
- Social problems, including discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, and socio-economic status;
- Death experiences, for example the loss of parents or siblings.

Ochse (1989) studied the characteristics and experiences that are typical of eminent productive creators and came to the following conclusion that supports the findings of psychobiographical research:

Unpleasant though it may be, there is a great deal of support for the suggestion that some imbalance or lack of comfort in childhood might bring

forth initiative, resourcefulness, and a motive to create something of value and be recognised for it.

Ochse [1989, pp.119-120]

Several artists echoed this sentiment. For example, in the song, *Anthem*, Leonard Cohen sang the following words:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in...*

Walt Disney was an American entrepreneur, animator, writer, voice actor, and film producer. He was a pioneer of the animation industry where he introduced several developments in the production of cartoons. He stated:

All the adversity I've had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me... You may not realise it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of decorated pioneer aviator Charles Lindbergh, was an American author and aviator. She added an important perspective to this theme:

*I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches.
If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added....*

That "*which must be added*" presents psychobiographers with one of the most important and elusive mysteries to resolve. For example, one of the issues that is still associated with much uncertainty is the relationship between early death experiences and extraordinariness. Our studies suggest that the death of a parent is one of the

challenging experiences that feature prominently in the lives of extraordinary individuals. They include Steve Biko (lost father at age five years), Siya Kolisi (lost mother at age 15 years, absent father), Albert Luthuli (lost father at age 10 years), Nelson Mandela (lost father at age 10 years), Winnie Mandela (lost father at age eight years), Gary Player (lost mother at age eight years), Albertina Sisulu (lost father at age 15 years), Walter Sisulu (absent father), Helen Suzman (mother died two weeks after her birth), Charlize Theron (lost father at age 15 years), and Jacob Zuma (lost father at age five years).

Several theoretical frameworks have proved useful in the search for answers to the question: What is the nature of the relationship between adversity, trauma, suffering and extraordinariness? These theoretical frameworks include Post-traumatic growth (Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun), Complete Model of Mental Health (Corey Keyes), Meaningfulness (Gordon Allport, Erik Erikson, Viktor Frankl, Carl Rogers), Optimism (Martin Seligman), Hope (Erik Erikson, Viktor Frankl), Self-extension/Task involvement (Gordon Allport), Perceptual style (Aaron Beck), Self-acceptance (Carol Ryff), Self-regulation (Kathleen D. Vohs and Roy F. Baumeister), and Humour (Abraham Maslow).

10. Psychobiographical Research: Conclusion

Despite psychobiography's controversial status and the challenges the approach face, few would argue against the value of intensive study of extraordinary individuals. These studies help us to improve our understanding of the diversity in human personality and achievement as well as the development of extraordinariness.

REFERENCES

Burgers, M.P.O. (1939). *Die mens Langenhoven*. Nasionale Pers.

Burgers, M.P.O. (1960). *C.L.Leipoldt: 'n Studie in stof-keuse, -verwerking en -ontwikkeling*. Nasionale Boekhandel.

Bushkin, H., Van Niekerk, R., & Stroud, L. (2021). Searching for meaning in chaos: Viktor Frankl's story. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 17(3), 233-242. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.5439>

Crous, F.C. (1999). *Die kontekstualisering van entrepreneurskap* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg.

Du Plessis, C. (2017). The method of psychobiography: Presenting a step-wise approach. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 14(2), 216-237. DOI:10.1080/14780887.2017.1284290

Earl, G. (2011). Albertina Sisulu 1918-2011. Nurse and South African anti-apartheid activist. *Nursing Standard*, 25(45), 33. doi: 10.7748/ns.25.45.33.s46

Eliastam, E.M. (2012). *A psychobiography of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu* [Unpublished Master's treatise]. University of Fort Hare, East London.

Elms, A. (1994). *Uncovering lives: The uneasy alliance of biography and psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Fouché, P., Du Plessis, R., & Van Niekerk, R. (2017). Levinsonian seasons in the life of Steve Jobs: A psychobiographical case study. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 17(1), 1-18. doi: 10.1080/20797222.2017.1331970

Fouché, P., Nel, C., & Van Niekerk, R. (2014). Helen Suzman: A psychobiographical-psychosocial developmental trajectory study. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 4, 351-360.

Fouché, J.P. & Van Niekerk, R. (2010). Academic psychobiography in South Africa: Past, present, and future. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 40(4), pp. 495-507

Freud, S. (1910). *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood*. W.W. Norton.

Gardner, H. (1997). *Extraordinary minds*. Phoenix.

Howe, M. (1997). Beyond psychobiography: Towards more effective syntheses of psychology and biography. *British Journal of Psychology*, 88, 235-248.

Jolly, M. (2001). *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. Routledge.

Kőváry, Z. (2011). Psychobiography as a method. The revival of studying lives: New perspectives in personality and creativity research. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 7(4), 739-777. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v7i4.162>

Kubler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. MacMillan.

- Kubler-Ross, E. (1997). *The wheel of life: A memoir on living and dying*. Bantam Press.
- Manganyi, N.C. (1983). *Exiles and homecomings: A biography of Es'kia Mphahlele*. Ravan Press.
- Mayer, C.H., Fouché, P.J.P., & Van Niekerk, R. (2021). Creating a meaningful life: Psychobiographical investigations. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 17(3), 146-151. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.6653>
- Mayer, C.H. & Van Niekerk, R. (2020). Creative minds of leaders in psychobiographical perspectives: Exploring the life and work of Christiaan Barnard and Angela Merkel. In S. Dhiman & J. Marques (Eds.), *New horizons in positive leadership and change: A practical guide for workplace transformation*. Springer.
- Mayer, C.H., Van Niekerk, R., & Fouché, J.P. (In press). Servant leadership during a struggle for political freedom: A psychobiography of Albertina Sisulu. In S. Dhiman, G. Roberts, & L. Spears (Eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership*. Palgrave.
- Mayer, C.H., Van Niekerk, R., & Wannenburg, N. (2021). Ferdinand Karl Piëch: A psychobiography of a ruthless manager and ingenious engineer. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. Doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.671243
- McAdams, D.P. (1994). *The person: An introduction to personality psychology* (2nd ed.). Harcourt Brace.
- McAdams, D.P. (2006). *The person: A new introduction to personality psychology* (4th ed.). John Wiley.
- McNair, M.P. (1954). *The case method at the Harvard Business School: Papers by present and past members of the faculty and staff*. McGraw-Hill.
- Meyer, W.F., Moore, C., & Viljoen, H.G. (2008). *Personology: From individual to ecosystem*. Heinemann
- Mouton, J. & Maas, C. (2014). *And then they fired me*. Tafelberg.
- Ndoro, T. (2013). *A psychobiography of Steve Jobs* [Unpublished master's treatise]. Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
- Ndoro, T. & Van Niekerk, R. (2019). A psychobiographical analysis of the personality traits of Steve Jobs's entrepreneurial life. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 19(1). <https://doi:10.1080/20797222.2019.1620421>
- Ochse, R. (1989). Toward the prediction and stimulation of creativity. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 19(3), 113-121.

Perry, M.J. (2012). *The life of Olive Schreiner: A psychobiography* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

Prenter, T., Van Niekerk, R., & Fouché, J.P. (2019). The amazing life of Charlize Theron. In C.H. Mayer & Z. Kovary (Eds.), *New Trends in Psychobiography* (pp.463-479). Springer.

Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Open University Press.

SAHO (2020). *Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu*. South African History Online <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/albertina-nontsikelelo-sisulu>.

Scott, J. (2006). *Documentary research* (Vol. 1-4). Sage.

Sisulu, E. (2003). *Walter and Albertina Sisulu. In our lifetime* (2nd ed.). David Philip Publishers.

South African Government (2018). *Albertina Sisulu Biography. A woman of fortitude*. South African Government. <https://www.gov.za/masisulu100>

Van Niekerk, R. (2007). *'n Psigobiografiese ontleding van Christiaan Neethling Barnard se loopbaanontwikkeling* [Unpublished master's treatise]. University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch.

Van Niekerk, R. & Fouché, P. (2014). *Psychobiographical analyses of entrepreneurs [3]: The career development of Raymond Ackerman*. Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychologists of South Africa, 21-23 July, Johannesburg.

Van Niekerk, R, Perry, M., & Fouché, P. (2016). Psychobiographical profiling. In T. Veldsman & A. Johnson (Eds.), *Leadership: Perspectives from the front line* (pp. 81-93). Knowledge Resources.

Van Niekerk, R., Vos, H., & Fouché, P. (2015). The career development of Christiaan Neethling Barnard: A psychobiography. *Special edition of Journal of Psychology in Africa (Psychobiographical Research)*, Vol 25 (5), 395-402. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2015.1101268>

Walker, C. (1991). *Women of resistance in South Africa* (2nd ed). David Philip Publishers.

Yin, R.K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage.