

Psychological Perspectives on the Development and Manifestation of Extraordinary Human Achievements

Roelf van Niekerk

ABSTRACT / SUMMARY

Psychobiographical research focuses on the lives of extraordinary individuals. In essence, psychobiographies are biographies that employ psychological theory to clarify, highlight and illuminate significant experiences, events, and contributions that characterise the lives of extraordinary individuals. Typically, psychobiographies comprise three elements: (a) a biographical account, or life story; (b) a detailed description of contextual factors, developmental processes, and accomplishments; and (c) a theoretical interpretation of the life story.

The origins of psychobiographical research dates back to 1910 when Sigmund Freud published *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood*. This publication is generally viewed as the first scientific psychobiography.

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, Cornelis Langenhoven, Louis Leipoldt, Eskia Mphahlele Anton Rupert, Gerard Sekoto, and Jan Smuts.

In the late 1990s a colleague (Professor Paul Fouché) 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. To date, more than 150 academic psychobiographies have been completed at South African universities.

The aim of this inaugural lecture is to review past contributions, current challenges, and future opportunities relating to psychobiographical research. Data from a number of completed studies will be employed to illustrate important findings and principles. These studies focus, for example, on the lives of Chris Barnard, Steve Biko, Temple Grandin, Steve Jobs, Chabani Manganyi, Helen Martins, Freddy Mercury, Angela Merkel, Sol Plaatje, Gary Player, Albertina Sisulu, Walter Sisulu, Helen Suzman, Oliver Tambo, Charlize Theron, Desmond Tutu, and Oprah Winfrey.

Psychobiographical research adds considerable value to psychological research. This includes the following:

- a. It contributes to the comprehensiveness of the historical record of extraordinary lives;
- b. It promotes the psychological understanding of extraordinariness;
- c. It recognises the role played in history by extraordinary individuals;
- d. It facilitates the reinterpretation of the contributions of extraordinary individuals, especially individuals who may be viewed as controversial;
- e. It promotes the value of in-depth, longitudinal and holistic psychological studies of individuals that incorporate contextual, environmental, and socio-cultural perspectives;
- f. It promotes inter-disciplinarity and invites contributions and 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. It contributes to the development and refinement of psychological theory.

The value of psychobiographical research for theory development and refinement is very important. 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. These challenging experiences relate to, for example, identity (e.g., inferiority), emotional (e.g., insecurity, resentment, jealousy, and depression), interpersonal (e.g., loneliness and rejection), familial (e.g., parental incompetence and sibling rivalry), health-related (e.g., disability), social (e.g., discrimination) or death-related (e.g., early loss of siblings or parents) issues.

In recent years psychobiographical research has developed into a vibrant and popular area of research and gained considerable national and international interest. Case studies of extraordinary individuals represent an intriguing and informative psychological research area that contributes to the holistic understanding of individual behaviour within sociocultural and historical contexts.

Despite the remarkable growth of psychobiographical research, the study of extraordinariness remains controversial. This probably relates to the fascinating love-hate relationships 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”*.

Psychobiographical researchers face several challenges. 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 writers, journalists, or other researchers. Lastly, in highly politicised contexts, psychobiographers who study particular political or business leaders often encounter unfortunate resistance and inappropriate criticism.

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 potential and extraordinary competence.