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The Fascinating World of Psychobiography

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Abstract

Although a relatively new approach to research, psychobiography has emerged as a fascinating, diverse, and useful approach to the interpretation of the lives and works of significant historical figures. Claude-Hélène Mayer and Zoltan Kovary in their wonderful, new, edited work, *New Trends in Psychobiography*, present not only an introduction to this type of research, but also share emerging and innovative ways psychobiographers are carrying out their fascinating case studies employing a variety of psychological personality theories.

Keywords

psychobiography, personality theory, qualitative research

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The Fascinating World of Psychobiography

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Although a relatively new approach to research, psychobiography has emerged as a fascinating, diverse, and useful approach to the interpretation of the lives and works of significant historical figures. Claude-Hélène Mayer and Zoltan Kovary in their wonderful, new, edited work, *New Trends in Psychobiography*, present not only an introduction to this type of research, but also share emerging and innovative ways psychobiographers are carrying out their fascinating case studies employing a variety of psychological personality theories.

Keywords: psychobiography, personality theory, qualitative research

I find it a little bit strange that I was first introduced to psychobiography some four decades into its formal development when I had the good fortune to read Joseph Ponterotto and Jason Reynolds (Taewon Choi)'s 2013 submission to *The Qualitative Report* entitled, "Bobby Fischer in Socio-Cultural Perspective: Application of Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart Methodology." I say "strange" given that my undergraduate degree in 1974 was in history and my graduate degrees are in counseling and family therapy in the 1980s and I have edited *The Qualitative Report* since 1990s, yet I was unfamiliar with "psychobiography as the systematic application of scientific psychology in the interpretation of life and works of significant people like artists, scientists, philosophers, activists, or politicians" (Mayer & Kovary, 2019a, p. 1) even though some of the foundational works were published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (e.g., Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1982; Stolorow & Atwood, 1979) and historically speaking one could trace this approach back to Freud's psychoanalytical work in the 1920s (Mayer & Kovary, 2019a).

I was aware of methods such as psychohistory, but not the rich and interesting world of psychobiography (Schultz, 2005a) in which researchers collect many types of data from an interesting person's life and then test various psychological theories of personality from disparate perspectives such as psychoanalysis and positive psychology to interpret the emerging patterns of these individual's inner worlds. Fortunately, if you too are unfamiliar with this fascinating body of work, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Zoltan Kovary (2019), in their new edited work, *New Trends in Psychobiography*, present a wonderful introduction to a variety of means researchers use to achieve the aim of psychobiography, which as Schultz (2005b) so nicely wrote "is simply stated, though immensely difficult to achieve: the understanding of people" (p. 3). An objective with which we as qualitative researchers are quite familiar.

Claude-Hélène Mayer and Zoltan Kovary accomplish their goal of helping new and experienced psychobiographers by building upon previous foundational works such as Schultz' (2005a) *Handbook of Psychobiography* and sharing the cornerstones of psychobiography in the first part of their book. In this section, the chapter authors share how to construct these life history narratives using methodological data collection and analysis procedures quite familiar to qualitative researchers. These authors also highlight the role personality therapy plays in the interpretation of these lives and how psychobiographers must continually challenge the validity of these personality theory-driven renderings of the data being organized and synthesized.

In the second section of the book, the authors present several epistemological, philosophical, and theoretical frameworks within which psychobiographers may understand and conduct their research. Notions such as positive psychology, phenomenology, systems theory, and narrative inquiry are all discussed as ways one can conceptualize, conduct, and criticize psychobiography. There is also discussion as to the procedures psychobiographers use to select a subject, collect qualitative and quantitative data, analyze, and synthesize the data, and to test the veracity and fit of psychological theories to better understand the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the person being studied.

Even if these more abstract discussions present some challenges to appreciating their applications in carrying out and understanding psychobiographies, Mayer and Kovary's third section of clear and interesting examples of actual psychobiographies should remedy any concerns to learning this fascinating approach to understanding the lives of others via a psychological lens. In these chapters, the researchers help to take us inside their case studies by sharing how they apply psychobiography theory and practice to produce stunning accounts of historical figures and some more contemporary subjects. In each chapter, the authors detail their methodological choices as they present how they constructed the life histories using well-justified personality theories. Taken together, sections two and three taken together form a type of master class in conceptualizing and conducting psychobiographies. A side benefit of reading these cases is besides learning how to carry out and report a psychobiography, we as readers can also learn much about some not-so-well-known psychology theories.

Mayer and Kovary conclude their edited work with a series of reflections through interviews with prominent psychobiographers such as the Joseph Ponterotto. I especially like this section because of the insights it brings to how these researchers conduct their work and themselves. Also, given the importance we as qualitative researchers hold for the role researchers play in producing qualitative inquiry, these interviews bring the critical importance credibility, trustworthiness, rigor, and ethics play in qualitative research in general and with psychobiography specifically.

So, whether you are new to psychobiography or not, I think you will find this book a useful resource to learning the basics and exploring novel ways to improve and enhance your work as a psychobiographer. I know as we continue to receive and publish psychobiographies at *The Qualitative Report* (e.g., Ferrer & Ponterotto, 2020), I feel fortunate to have excellent guides such as Claude-Hélène Mayer and Zoltan Kovary's *New Trends in Psychobiography* to help us as reviewers and editors to be informed of the new and innovative ways psychobiographers craft their works, as well as to be well-schooled in the traditions and basics of this growing and fascinating family of researchers and their work.

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