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The sociocultural lens in psychobiography

Psychobiography in the light of sociocultural contexts

The study of the lives of extraordinary individuals has gained momentum in the past years (e.g. Mayer & Kovary, 2019; Schultz, 2005). Increasingly, researchers and psychobiographers from various socio-cultural contexts and countries have started to explore the life development of individuals from an in-depth psychological, psychobiographical, psychohistorical and theory-led perspective (Mayer et al., 2023).

Initially most psychobiographers used psychoanalytic theories to explore, describe and interpret the lives of individuals (Elms, 1994). However, over time psychobiographers have developed further, both in terms of theoretical frameworks and methodological approach (Mayer & Fouché, 2021; Ponterotto, 2014; Van Niekerk, 2021).

Currently, the focus of psychobiographies is primarily on the individual, intra-personal development across the life span. Often the socio-cultural context is minimally considered or even neglected when the development of the individual is described, analysed and interpreted. Mayer et al. (2023) have recently highlighted that most of the psychobiographical research has in the past focused on WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) individuals and contexts (Heinrich, 2020). They claimed further that psychobiographies need to take more non-WEIRD individuals and contexts into consideration. In the context of this major paradigm shift in psychobiography, it becomes increasingly important to also explore individuals and their development through a socio-cultural lens.

Therefore, this *Special Issue* focuses on the influence of socio-cultural factors on the lives of extraordinary individuals. Authors use and apply theories from cultural sciences, social and cultural psychology, as well as social and cultural anthropology. The editors propose a shift in focus which becomes more inclusive of the external, the societal, the socio-cultural and contextual influences in the lives of individuals from birth to death. This *Special Issue* thereby expands the disciplinary use of theories in psychobiographies and encourages researchers to apply theories which are transdisciplinary. It is expected that this *Special Issue* will evoke questions, critique and

comments since it invites researchers to complement the existing psychobiographical approaches with more inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in terms of theory and methodology.

In reaction to the *Call for Papers* for this *Special Issue*, a prominent South African psychobiographer, cautioned that psychobiography should not become ethnography. He highlighted the following:

To make a purist calling for a social-cultural biographical research approach or lens, makes it no longer a psychobiographical approach per se, due to the primary loss of psychology in the psycho-historical and psycho-cultural context in which an individual of interest is investigated. It becomes socio-cultural biography (most often called – ethnography). It is in fact nothing more than ethnographic research (most closely related to a type of sociological and anthropological research design about the lived experiences from a specific sociological and cultural point of view).

Ethnographic research (emphasizes the experience of individuals from within their cultural context), and is inter alia a primary research approach used by sociologists and Anthropologists. If the psychological and historical dimensions are not considered, it no longer is a form of psychohistory, and in particular, psychobiography.

Then ethnographic researchers in sociology and anthropology are also included in the domain of psychobiographical studies.

My call is to be careful/wary that psychobiography does not lose its psychological and historical context and identity, and 'spice', and become even more diffuse to include ethnographic research approaches per se, without psychology at the core. Then psychobiographers start to lose their unique psychological identity and lens, in a similar fashion to what Robert Yin and Robert Stake...forewarned us regarding case-study research. It then becomes a 'basket-case research approach'. Thus, implying anything that does not fit into an existing design can be called a case study...I would not like to see the day that psychobiography adopts a purist socio-cultural approach to life studies. Psychological theory should always be present at its

heart. Socio-cultural, historical and political macro-forces will always be considered, but not without a psychological grounding...Please do not make psychobiography a form of ethnographic research.... (P.J.P. Fouché, personal communication, 20 May, 2023)

Naturally, Fouché's email to the *Call for Papers* evoked responses from editors and contributors. Van Niekerk defended the proposed *Special Issue*. He argued that several disciplines (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and social work) overlap and that the boundaries that separate them are permeable. He added:

...if we shift the focus to the different psychological sub-disciplines, the extent of this overlap increases. For example, industrial psychology overlaps to a large extent with administrative, management, and human resources disciplines. Students often ask me why they are required to focus on the same theoretical frameworks in different subjects (e.g. industrial psychology, industrial sociology, management...). My answers have not always been clear and convincing...I am in favour of relaxing the psychobiographical boundaries a bit. And to share this fascinating, relevant, and useful research genre/approach/methodology with colleagues who work in our neighbouring academic disciplines... As a psychologist, I will always prefer the use of psychological theories in my interpretive work. But, I am tempted to cast the theoretical/disciplinary net a bit wider in future. I believe this may add to the value, reach and relevance of psychobiographical research. (R. van Niekerk, personal communication, 20 May, 2023).

This discussion of what psychobiography actually is and how it fits into mainstream psychology has a long tradition (Carlson, 1971, 1988; Kasser, 2017). How psychobiographers from different social, cultural and disciplinary backgrounds define it and how tight or broad the boundaries are established is part of the ongoing discourses in contemporary psychobiography.

Twenty years ago, Runyan (2005) referred to different approaches to psychobiography that exist within psychological sub-disciplines. Fouché and van Niekerk (2010) discussed the importance of internationalizing psychobiography in a publication that explored the past, present and future of psychobiographical research within the South African context. Other researchers, such as Wegner (2020), also called for a more inclusive psychobiographical approach in psychobiography and from (Western) psychobiographers.

Surely, this discourse is not new since in the history of psychological sciences, individuals have always pointed out the intersectionalities of psychology with cultural, ethnic, gendered and social domains. However, according to Gone (2011) this discourse is 'replete with disinterest, dismissal, or denigration of these diverse forms of psychological experience' (p. 234).

The authors of this *Special Issue* believe that this does not need to be the case and that the psychological and cultural sciences can take hands within psychobiography and together make significant contributions to social science research. The editors believe that exploring the influence of social and cultural influences on the lives of extraordinary individuals can create important new knowledge. They support Gone's (2011) conclusion that psychology cannot be a-cultural or even anti-cultural, since psychology always manifest in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts and is *per se* influenced by situational or contextual circumstances. Regrettably, in the past these influences have not received sufficient attention in psychobiographical research.

In an edited volume *Psychobiographical illustrations on meaning and identity in socio-cultural contexts*, Mayer et al. (2021) explored aspects of meaning-making and identity constructions across the life course and the impact that these constructs have on extraordinary individuals in terms of their psychological development, mental health and well-being. The editors focused not only on the individual development of individuals, but also on the relationships between individuals and their socio-cultural contexts. Two years later, Mayer et al. (2023) challenged the discourse on psychobiography further by encouraging psychobiographical research that focuses on non-WEIRD individuals and is conducted in non-WEIRD contexts. With this initiative Mayer et al. (2023) tried to achieve a better balance between research carried out within WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts (also see Henrich et al., 2010; Jones, 2010; Kanazawa, 2020).

A recent special issue in the *Journal of Personality* edited by Adler and Singer (2023) focused specifically on the psychobiographical exploration of the lives and impact of *social change agents*. The editors highlighted the importance of focusing on both world leaders and *everyday change agents* in psychobiographical research. Similarly, Mayer (2023) urged psychobiographers to not only focus on the lives of extraordinary individuals into account, but to also explore the lives and impact of *everyday heroes*.

About this *Special Issue*

This *Special Issue* contributes to the international discourse on the influence of socio-cultural factors on psychobiographical subjects and psychobiography. It stands in the tradition of several previous publications (see above) and extends an invitation to psychobiographers to contribute to psychobiography and to also study individuals from non-WEIRD contexts. The *Special Issue* includes 16 articles that provide new perspectives and aim at presenting a broad and in-depth view of the influence of socio-cultural factors on individuals lives.

The *Special Issue* comprises five sections. The first three sections focus on extraordinary individuals who

contributed to the political, sport and creative arts contexts. The fourth section focuses on the life and contributions of an extraordinary psychologist, while the last section focuses on theoretical and methodological issues. The articles included in the *Special Issue* are reviewed next.

Extraordinary individuals in the political context

In *Trauma, culture, and feminism: Golda Meir – Israeli Prime Minister (1969–1974)*, Moshe Banai and Claude-Hélène Mayer explored Meir's life and career. The article focuses on how Meir's life and leadership was influenced by trauma she experienced early in her life as well as how she served the political system. Meir served in an all-men political system and naturally this influenced her public image, personal and political behavior, as well as decision-making throughout her career.

Benjamin Wegner explored the life and circumstances of an American civil rights movement leader in 'The risks and rewards of having a backbone: A Psychobiographical investigation of Ida B Wells'. More specifically, the article focuses on what it means and what is required to challenge inequality at a societal level through the lens of Ridgeway's cultural schema and status theory. Wells promoted the cause of African Americans and negotiated social-, gender, race- and class issues within the context of the 19th and 20th century civil rights movements.

In *A chronicle of the liberation struggle: The career development of Ahmed Kathrada, Roelf van Niekerk and Vikki Botes* investigated the life and liberation struggle of a South African anti-Apartheid activist, political prisoner and parliamentary politician. Kathrada had been at the center of South Africa's liberation struggle for six decades. The authors employ the career development framework of Greenhaus and the ecological human development systems framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner to illuminate Kathrada's career development.

Carla Nel, Tanica Vorster and Paul J-P. Fouché explored the life of a South African anti-Apartheid activist and politician in an article titled *Guiding psychologists through inner and outer worlds: Reflections from an academic Levinsonian psychobiography of Joe Slovo*. The authors employed two theoretical lenses, namely Levinson's theory of lifespan development and Alexander's approach to data identification and extraction. The article illuminates how external forces such as family dynamics, historical events, politics and culture influence developmental trajectories.

In *A psychobiographical analysis of Empress Dowager Cixi: Exploring the femininity castrated complex*, Zeyu Wang, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Jiaming Li explored the life of Empress Cixi. The authors demonstrate how women leaders may be stigmatized based on the socio-cultural and historical influences in which they

rule and how the humiliation and suppression of women with political talent can trigger personal and cultural complexes. The authors propose the femininity castrated complex to describe the psychological dynamics impacting on women within patriarchal, political contexts.

Extraordinary individuals in the sport context

Xie Xia, Pan Chao, He Ao and Shu Yueyu explored the life of a Kung Fu master in *Cross-cultural experience and self-development: A psychobiographical study of Bruce Lee*. The authors explored how Lee bridged Eastern and Western cultures through his passion for Martial Arts and the film industry. The authors argue that Lee's upbringing in diverse social and cultural traditions enabled him to acquire the skills to deal successfully with cultural differences and the problems which derive from the experience of these differences.

In *Breaking barriers: A psychobiography of Siya Kolisi from a socio-cultural perspective* Tinashe Harry describes how the first African captain of the South African rugby team navigated potentially traumatic events, racial inequality, racism, and poverty during his childhood and how he eventually became one of the most influential international players. The author used the Multiple Worlds Model and the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory to explore the socio-cultural influences in Kolisi's life.

Extraordinary individuals in the creative Arts context

Brittney Rogmana employed feminist and attachment theories during the analysis and interpretation of a famous artist's artwork and diary entries in *The art of resilience: A psychobiography of Frida Kahlo*. Rogmana explored the experience of women in patriarchal societies and illuminated both the physical and psychological pain Kahlo experienced as well as the perseverance and strengths she demonstrated.

In *The Greek photographer Nelly's: The interplay of personal and socio-cultural theme of 'rebirth'* Athena Androutsopoulou and Christos Korovilas explored the theme of 'rebirth' in the life and work of the Greek photographer Nelly. Nelly's experiences were influenced by the Greek-Turkish war, her studies in Germany and her work in Greece and the USA. The authors employed Life-Story-Interview to illuminate turning points in Nelly's life through which she became a different person and created meaning.

Extraordinary individuals in the science context

By employing Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory Ágnes Bálint explored several impactful cultural experiences in

Cultural foundations of a mathematician's thinking: A psychobiographical exploration of Zoltán Paul Dienes and his cognitive development. Dienes spent time in several countries, including Hungary, Austria, the United Kingdom, and France, and the author describes how socio-cultural influences impacted on Dienes life and work as a mathematician and educator.

In *Psychobiographical reflections on Viktor von Weizsäcker within the cultural framework of salutogenesis and medical anthropology* Ottomar Bahrs and Claude-Hélène Mayer focus on the life and work of a German medical doctor and philosopher who founded the Heidelberg School of Anthropological Medicine. The authors explored the crucial historical and socio-cultural influences which impacted on von Weizsäcker during the 19th and 20th century and analyzed his life and work in the light of complex interfamilial and intergenerational bonds.

Extraordinary individuals in the psychology context

Vikki Botes and Roelf van Niekerk employed Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Theory of Human Development* Framework in *The socio-cultural influences in Lawrence Kohlberg's life: A psychobiographical analysis* to explore how the reciprocal influence between individual development and socio-cultural influences shaped Kohlberg's identity, education, career path and success. Kohlberg's experiences during World War II prompted the development of a framework to improve morality and justice within society.

Theoretical and methodological discourses in psychobiography

In *Promoting psychobiography: Models and perspectives from multiple countries* Abigail Jareño, Claude-Hélène Mayer, Zoltán Kövály, Joseph G. Ponterotto, and James Anderson propose the integration of psychobiography into academic training in psychology. They reviewed the current scope of psychobiographical training in five countries, summarized the benefits of psychobiography to both the training of students and the discipline of psychology, and provide recommendations for advancing psychobiography into academic psychology.

Amadeusz Citlak explored the topic of power in the context of religion by reviewing different theories in the *Desire for a sense of power in psychobiographical research and religious suicide (combining personality and socio-cultural theories)*. Citlak reviewed examples in several socio-cultural and historical contexts and argues that religious suicides need to be viewed as acts of healthy, conscious, educated and socially integrated individuals who wish to regain a sense of dignity, strength and control.

In *Psychobiography in socio-cultural context: The application of culture-based theories of psychology on a culturally diverse historic subject pool*, Joseph G. Ponterotto, Jason D. Reynolds and Ellen Short argue that a critical component of strong multicultural psychobiography is the inclusion of anchoring theories of psychology that are rooted in socio-cultural and political contexts. This article reviews several psychological theories that set a foundation for more nuanced and culturally contextualized psychological profiles of historic personalities who represent diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

This *Special Issue* focuses on the influence of socio-cultural factors on the lives of extraordinary individuals. The editors propose an inclusive focus that allows for the description, analysis and interpretation of societal, socio-cultural and contextual influences in the lifespans of individuals. The editors therefore invited contributors to expand the existing psychobiographical approaches by adding inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in terms of theory and methodology. The contributors responded by employing a wide range of theoretical frameworks from social and cultural psychology, sociology, as well as social and cultural anthropology. The editors expect that the *Special Issue* will be received as provocative and that it will evoke questions, critique and comments from psychobiographers.

The 28 contributors who contributed to this *Special Issue* are from nine countries, namely China, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, South Africa, Spain, United States and Zimbabwe.

The contributors employed a wide range of theoretical frameworks and the 16 articles provide novel, provocative and compelling perspectives on the influence of socio-cultural factors on individual lives.

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