

Book Review of

Psychobiography: In Search of the Inner Life

by James William Anderson, PhD

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Most psychological research investigations address a small piece of behavior under highly controlled circumstances. They give us a slice of life, invite us to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses, and generate new hypotheses. Personality theory, however, addresses the whole person, and one of the most compelling avenues of research investigation is the study of lives—whole lives. We have in James Anderson’s new book a wonderful contribution to the study of lives.

Psychobiography: In Search of the Inner Life, by James William Anderson, offers a disciplined approach for conducting scholarly psychobiographical investigations. It is a methodological guide for conducting psychobiographical research that helps us learn something new about the social and psychological factors that have motivated a person throughout their life.

Anderson’s subtitle, “In Search of the Inner Life,” tells us about the focus of a psychobiography and explicitly diverts us from the exclusive search of the outer life. The straightforward biography, attending only to the outer life, is concrete and addresses the objects and events of a person’s life. Such an approach leans heavily on reason, conscious choices, and rational decisions and typically yields a heroic narrative biography, which is quite appropriate for obituaries, biographical sketches, and accounts of history. But a psychobiography attends not only to objects and events

but to relationships and experiences as well. The heroic figure, the one who is commonly presented in biography, journalism, and brief accounts of history, is decentered in the psychobiography by locating the subject not only in their deeds and contributions but also in the development of their psychic life in relation to their familial, social, and historical contexts.

Psychobiography: In Search of the Inner Life is not a psychobiography itself. It is a guide for psychobiographical researchers and authors of psychobiographies, and it will find a comfortable place of honor on my bookshelf between William McKinley Runyan's *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* and Alan C. Elms's *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance between Biography and Psychology*.

Anderson takes us on a tour of methodological considerations, presenting strategies for conducting scholarly psychobiographical research and calling attention to common errors. He reminds us of the pitfalls of writing a psychobiography that either idealizes or denigrates the subject. Whether the subject is a great person or a horrible person, the psychobiography strives to discover the subjective reality of the person, their humanness, and therefore their similarity to us all. A tabloid exposé of a movie star can present one subject as an ideal and god-like figure far beyond the rest of us, and another subject as a low-life scoundrel to look down upon. A psychobiography, however, demonstrates the humanness of both the star and the scoundrel and makes them more available to our empathy and identification.

Psychobiographies employ psychological theories as lenses through which to view and understand the experiences of the subject. Anderson cautions us to avoid using theory to explain, reduce, or pathologize the subject but instead to guide the investigation. One can use psychoanalytic theory to accuse the subject of having an Oedipus complex, being defensive, or having a particular diagnosis. But that is not really psychoanalytic theory; that's name calling. In my psychobiography of Sigmund Freud's oldest grandson, W. Ernest Freud (*The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis*, 2015) I found psychoanalytic theory useful in recognizing Ernest's early childhood traumas and the resulting repetition compulsions throughout his lifetime. Without the concept of the repetition compulsion, the events of his life are disconnected happenings, but with this concept the patterns in his life and their reasons to be

become clear to us. I did not use theory to accuse him of anything but rather to help understand recurring themes and behavior patterns in his life.

Anderson advises the psychobiographer to “use theory as a guide but to be careful that the theory accords with the evidence. Theory should help the authors see what they might otherwise miss, to help them become open to possibilities. We seek to use theory, rather than to have theory use us” (Anderson, p. 10). He says, “Psychological concepts are most valuable when they open up, not close down; when they lead us to see and make sense of material that otherwise we might overlook” (Anderson, p. 136).

Anderson speaks of how the researcher might choose a subject and cautions against the dangers of idealization and denigration. I have heard some say the researcher needs to “like” the subject because one will need to maintain interest in the project for months or years to come. I would say one needs to find the subject “compelling,” whether likable or not. W. Ernest Freud was a fairly neurotic character, but his story was, for me, compelling from the very beginning, and by the time I had finished my work with him, I had also come to like him very much, and without illusions.

Anderson discusses the use of documents, interviews with informants, photos, video recordings, paintings, drawings, works of fiction, dreams, fantasies, and delusions. They all offer useful information in the psychobiographer’s work, provided one stay close to the data and not over-interpret it. He also advocates for the use of archives, as they often contain valuable and unexpected bits of information of great use to the psychobiographer. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the culture and times of the subject and not interpreting the subject in accordance with the psychobiographer’s modern perspective. Culture includes the laws, institutions, values, and common beliefs of the time. I once interviewed a man who left Germany at the time of the Nazi boycott of Jewish stores in 1933. He described his perilous escape and said that he and his mother then returned to Germany a short time later. After registering my shock and confusion, he said, “Well, we still had illusions then. You mustn’t forget, we still didn’t know what was to come. And indeed, what was to come was not obvious, or not to us. It only became clear with the benefit of hindsight” (Benveniste, p. 169).

While I have used my own psychobiographical work to amplify some of the themes that Anderson describes, the reader will find examples of other psychobiographies on virtually every page of this book. The reader will learn of Henry and William James, Arthur Miller, Anaïs Nin, Edith Wharton, Donald Trump, Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud, Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, Elvis Presley, Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, Simone de Beauvoir, and many more. Some of the psychobiographical works were written by Anderson himself, but most are by other psychobiographers and are used as examples of the scholarly or unscholarly use of data, theory, and interpretation.

Anderson describes what Erik H. Erikson called the “countertransference” of the psychobiographer to the subject of the research. It is a fascinating subject that becomes all the more fascinating when the subject is alive, known to the author, and develops a transference to the author. In these circumstances the crossfire of transference reactions can be most illuminating if it does not significantly distort the author’s perspective or entirely sideline the project. I am reminded here of Paula Broadwell’s biography of General David Petraeus. Apparently, upon completion of the book it emerged that Petraeus and Broadwell were having a sexual affair.

Anderson describes the interesting experience of a young Doris Kearns Goodwin working on her biography of President Lyndon Johnson and spending hours and hours with him (Anderson, p. 76). At one point she learns that his conversations with her, as young as she was, are reminding him of his conversations with his own mother. In other words, he is developing a maternal transference to her. I had a somewhat similar experience in my work with W. Ernest Freud. I was two years older than his son would have been had he not died in an accident many years before. But Ernest did not see me as a son. Instead, he saw me as a new version of his long-lost little brother, Heinerle, who had died in 1923 at only four years of age (Benveniste, p. 501–532).

Anderson writes, “Almost always there are powerful reasons why psychobiographers are attracted to their subjects. The psychobiographer might admire the person, might want to be like the person, might hate the person, might want to get revenge on the person, might see the person as the parent one always wished to have, might want the reflected glory of studying the person, or might see the person as similar to someone disliked and want to reveal how dastardly such people are. There

would also be a mixture of such aims. This personal attraction or antipathy incites the psychobiographer to engage the study with energy and persistence” (Anderson, p. 65).

I agree with Anderson and would add that, as with any passionate interest, the investigator is finding something of themselves in the object of exploration. When Apollo 8 circled the moon for the first time in 1968, astronaut Bill Anders took the famous photo of the Earthrise over the lunar landscape. It galvanized the environmental movement and stirred many to reconsider the folly of war. Upon his return, Anders noted the irony that we went to explore the moon and discovered the Earth. There’s a bit of truth in that for psychobiographers as well. They choose a personally compelling subject, spend years studying that person, and often discover a bit of themselves in the process. The psychobiographical impulse is a way to get close and be intimately involved with a “compelling” figure—a scientist, artist, politician, writer, adventurer—with whom the investigator finds some sort of resonance. The resonance is what helps us to maintain the discipline to stay with the project; it is also the autobiographical component of the psychobiography.

Anderson asks how psychobiography can add to our understanding of the work or art of the subject (Anderson, p. 222). It is a good and important question. Psychobiography, of course, presents the life and work of the subject in psychological context, and this naturally makes the person easier to identify with, empathize with, and understand. Their work also takes on texture and depth with such an analysis, and from this our appreciation of their contributions deepen. Psychobiography does not situate the subject on Mount Olympus or denigrate them into the sewers but rather makes them more human. It humanizes them, helps the reader to see how they might be similar to or different from the subject but certainly on the same plane—the human plane.

A psychobiography, like a case presentation, should sound like the presentation of a person, not a trapped animal, not a pinned butterfly. The psychobiography brings out the subject’s humanness in all its dimensions. If the psychobiographer arrives at a psychiatric diagnosis, it is hoped it won’t put the patient in a box but rather help us to illuminate the subject’s psychopathology—that is, the suffering of their soul.

As I read and studied Anderson's book, I was reminded of one of my principal and ongoing questions I had when I attended a psychobiography work group in San Francisco in the 1990s: Can a psychobiography be written about an average person who is not famous? My conclusion is that it could be, and it would probably be at least as interesting as the psychobiographies of famous figures in history.

One evening in 2004 I was on the railroad platform in the small English mining town of Burnley waiting for my train back to London when I met a somewhat hypomanic young man from Liverpool. His hair was cut in a Mohawk style, and several metal rings pierced his eyebrow and ears. "Where ya from?" he asked, jumping from one foot to the other, back and forth.

"I'm originally from San Francisco but now living in Venezuela," I said.

"What's a San Franciscan from Venezuela doin' in Buuuuurnley?" he wanted to know.

I explained that I was writing a psychobiography about one of Sigmund Freud's grandsons and had come to Burnley to interview the grandson's ex-wife. And then he asked, "Whoi don' ya jus' wri' one abou' yer bess mate's mum?" (Translation: "Why don't you just write one about your best friend's mother?")

And why not? His question raises broader concerns, such as why we research, write, and read psychobiography and also how we choose a subject. Now, it is true that a reader's attention is better held with references to famous figures and historical events, but many of the astonishing connections made in the psychobiographies of famous people are every bit as present in "normal" people such as my patients. I once heard that a psychoanalyst was looking forward to retiring because he wanted to start reading all the novels he never had time to read during his career. When he finally retired and started reading the novels, he was surprised to discover they were nowhere near as interesting as his patients.

Throughout Anderson's new book he makes frequent reference to important psychobiographers and their contributions and to the formulators of scholarly psychobiographical theory and research. Among the early formulators, we learn of Sigmund Freud, Erik H. Erikson, and especially Henry Murray. Then on page 174 we are treated to a lovely 1986 photograph of an elderly Henry Murray with three of his students: Alan C. Elms, James William Anderson, and William "Mac" Runyan.

The three young men pictured would carry on Henry Murray's tradition and promote psychobiography into the next generation. I have often said, "Psychoanalysis is a human tradition passed on from one generation to the next," and this photo beautifully demonstrates that psychobiography is also passed on from one generation to the next. Anderson's **Psychobiography: In Search of the Inner Life** is a blazing torch representing the psychobiographical tradition, which he lovingly and enthusiastically passes on to the next generation.



Alan C. Elms, James William Anderson, and William "Mac" Runyan

Henry Murray, at 93 years of age, in the foreground

Benveniste, D. (2015). *The interwoven lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud: Three generations of psychoanalysis*. International Psychoanalytic Books, New York.