Chapter 4

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What Psychobiographers Might Learn From Personality Psychology

Personality psychology is the scientific study of the whole person. The ultimate goal of personality psychology is to provide a valid account of an individual person's life (Allport, 1937; McAdams, 2001a). In a similar vein, psychobiographers aim to provide psychological accounts of individual human lives, especially the lives of famous or controversial persons. In applying psychological concepts to the particular life, psychobiographers often put into practice ideas that are of central concern to personality psychology (Runyan, 1990). You might think, therefore, that psychobiography and personality psychology would have much in common. You might expect that personality psychologists would find many illuminating case examples in the literature of psychobiography and that psychobiographers might draw upon contemporary personality theory and research to inform their explorations of the individual human life. You might even envision a lively and critical dialogue between the "fields" of personality psychology and psychobiography. But if you thought, expected, or imagined any of this, you would be wrong.

With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Ogilvie, 2003; Schultz, 1996), personality psychology and psychobiography today have little to do with each other. To the extent that there is a relationship between the two, it might best be described with such words as "contemporaries" or "parallels." Hard-nosed (and perhaps hard-headed) personality researchers may contemptuously dismiss psychobiographical efforts, claiming they are fanciful, unsubstantiated, and nonscientific. Psychobiographers may avoid the entire field of personality psychology, save psychoanalytic theory and its offshoots, because they assume it traffics mainly in trivial generalities and methodological technicalities. Both viewpoints are not without merit. Critics of psychobiography (e.g., Stannard, 1980) have little difficulty finding egregious examples of wild speculation and baseless claims. And critics of personality psychology have taken the field to task for its tendency toward reductionism and its preference for simplistic (though objective) methods and measures (e.g., Block, 1995). Even the most empirically minded personality psychologist often finds it difficult to stay awake as he or she reads through an issue or two of any scientific personality journal. It is also true that while personality psychologists typically identify themselves as "scientists," many psychobiographers see what they do as, partly, an "art." Personality psychologists aim to develop theories and test hypotheses that may be applied to many different people, while psychobiographers focus on one particular person at a time. To borrow Allport's (1937) old distinction, personality psychologists are oriented more toward the nomothetic, whereas what psychobiographers do is, by necessity, idiographic.

Nonetheless, it seems odd that even the best psychobiographies and the brightest examples of important personality research rarely seem to take each other into consideration. For all their differences in emphasis, after all, both endeavors aim to comprehend the whole person. In an effort to build a relationship between psychobiography and related efforts, on the one hand, and contemporary personality psychology, on the other, a number of scholars have strongly urged personality psychologists to open their minds and their research programs to the possibilities of case-based research, narrative methodologies, and the use of biography in the study of lives (Carson, 1988; McAdams & West, 1997; Nasby & Read, 1997; Wiggins, 2003). There is some evidence to suggest that personality psychologists have begun to listen and learn, for recent years have witnessed an opening up of the field and a flourishing of conceptual and methodological diversity (McAdams, 2001a). Perhaps it is time, then, for psychobiographers to listen, as well, and to learn what lessons they might glean from a careful reading of contemporary research and theorizing in personality psychology. If a constructive (and constructively critical) dialogue between personality psychology and psychobiography is ever to emerge, both sides will need first to learn what the other has to offer.

The explicit and immediate goal of this chapter is to suggest a few lessons that psychobiographers might draw from contemporary personality psychology. The implicit and long-term goal is to urge biographers, life writers, and all those individuals who find human individuality so fascinating to consider much more carefully and critically what the scientific study of human individuality—that is, personality psychology—has to offer. It is still true that people who look to psychology for guidance and insight regarding the mysteries of individual lives typically look no further than Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition. Most psychobiographers still draw mainly on Freud, or what they think Freud said (Eins, 1994). While the psychoanalytic tradition has generated countless stimulating ideas for psychology as a whole, Freudian theory and its derivatives (e.g., Jung, ego psychology, object-relations theory) are no longer dominant forces in personality psychology. This is not to say that psychobiographers (or anybody else, for that matter) should abandon psychoanalytic concepts. But in limiting themselves to one particular theoretical tradition, psychobiographers may miss opportunities to enrich their interpretations with a wide range of well-researched concepts about human personality that offer important new insights and ask new and important questions.

Historical Context

Personality psychology emerged as a distinctive field in the behavioral and social sciences in the 1930s with the publication of canonical texts by Allport (1937) and Murray (1938) and the establishment of the journal Character and Personality (now the Journal of Personality), and the coming together of such disparate lines of inquiry as German character studies, British and American surveys of individual differences, psychoanalytic essays and case studies, and anthropological explorations of culture and personality (McAdams, 1997, Winter & Barenbaum, 1999). The putative founders of the field—Gordon Allport and Henry Murray—envisioned a discipline that was hospitable to psychological biography. Although Allport was suspicious of all things Freudian, he championed the use of personal documents in psychology (Allport, 1942) and the study of the single case (Allport, 1965). Favorably disposed to both Freud and Jung, Murray employed biographical methods and case studies, and he devoted many years of his life to a psychobiographical exploration of Herman Melville (Murray, 1949, 1951). Among Murray's many collaborators in developing the influential methods and concepts that came out of Explorations in Personality (Murray, 1938) was Erik Erikson, who went on to write two of the most highly regarded psychobiographies: Young Man Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Gandhi's Truth (Erikson, 1969).

Allport and Murray believed that personality psychologists might undertake intensive biographical studies of the single case to illustrate personality concepts and to refine or reformulate theory. Exemplified in Freud's many clinical case studies and Robert White's (1938) case of "Earst," the psychologist might illustrate the power of a particular idea—be it the Oedipus complex or a particular constellation of psychogenic needs—through an in-depth case study. In these kinds of analyses, the key theory or concept would be worked out ahead of time; the analysis would involve the application of the extant theory or concept to the life; the interpretive move would be from the general theory to the more particular life. But in-depth biographical studies of the single case might also be used
to discover or develop theory, a point that Allport strongly urged. Through induction, a psychologist might formulate more general propositions from the concrete data of the case. According to Allport, personality psychologists should approach the individual case with an open mind, ready to learn new things and develop new theories from the particulars of a person's life.

The particulars of a person’s life have always been the grist for the psychobiographer’s mill, going all the way back to Freud’s (1910/1957) psychobiography of Leonardo. Psychobiographers since Freud have usually tried to arrange and interpret these particulars according to such concepts as the Oedipus complex, psychosocial stages and early family dynamics, the conflict between instinctual expression and societal oppression, internalized objects and unconscious mental representations, the developmental process of separation-individuation, and other ideas that have enjoyed strong currency in psychoanalytic circles. Indeed, many early psychobiographers saw their work as an exercise in applied psychoanalysis (Runyan, 1988). Although the earliest practitioners of psychobiography were psychiatrists and practicing analysts, scholars from many other disciplines—history, political science, literary studies, anthropology, sociology—quickly took up the challenge of interpreting the lives of the famous and the notorious through a psychoanalytic frame.

Interest in psychobiography grew slowly in the first half of the twentieth century but increased substantially after about 1950 (Runyan, 1988). As psychobiographies became more and more popular, critics began to highlight important problems and shortcomings. Psychobiographers were too quick to pathologize their subjects, many critics claimed, often reducing genius or leadership to other admirable qualities of human life to diagnostic categories, personality disorders, or dysfunctional family relations. Some psychobiographers overemphasized the influence of early stages of development or singular incidents in the biography, rather than examining the entire pattern of a life set in time and social context. Still others based their conclusions on inadequate evidence or the imaginative reconstruction of unknown events, especially events from childhood. Standards for good psychobiography eventually emerged (Alexander, 1990; Anderson, 1981, 2003; Elms, 1988; Runyan, 1982; see also Schultz, chap. 1 this vol.), even as many psychobiographers continued to violate them. While the practice of psychobiography remained highly controversial, some scholars observed that meaningful progress in psychobiographical inquiry could nonetheless be discerned. For example, Runyan (1988) documented advances in the understanding of particular lives as psychobiographers brought forth new evidence and used new data collection procedures, published critical examinations of the evidence in particular cases, tested competing interpretations, revised life history accounts in light of new developments, and incorporated a greater array of social, political, and historical factors in their interpretations.

In the meantime, the field of personality psychology developed along a very different trajectory. Although the pioneers of the 1930s and 1940s showed interest in biographical methods and the application of broad theories to the individual life, personality psychologists moved in the direction of laboratory methods and psychometrics after World War II, as they eschewed the study of lives and focused their attention on a handful of key personality constructs (e.g., achievement motivation, anxiety, field-independence, response bias; but for exceptions, see White, 1963). Despite important advances in measurement and method in personality psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, critics of the field began to doubt the efficacy of personality constructs, essentially arguing that situational factors (but not personality variables) determine what people do (Mischel, 1968). Many questioned the need for personality constructs (and personality theory), and by the 1970s the field of personality faced an intellectual crisis. Defenders of the field, however, launched strong counterattacks in the 1980s, and new evidence was adduced to suggest that well-defined and operationalized measures of personality constructs were reliable and valid predictors of behavior, especially when behavior was aggregated across different situations (Epstein, 1986). Developments in many different areas led to a resurgence of important research and creative theorizing in personality psychology in the 1980s. Since that time, the field has witnessed the revival of interest in personality traits, advances in the conceptualization of social-cognitive variables in personality, and the emergence of narrative-based theories and methods in the study of lives. All three of these developments suggest important implications for the practice of psychobiography.

A Contemporary Framework for Personality

Research and theory in personality psychology today may be organized into three areas or levels (Hooker, 2002; McAdams, 1995, 2001a). The three levels specify three kinds of descriptions and explanations that psychologists (and other persons) might offer in answering the question, “What do I know when I know a person?” In their scientific efforts to know persons, personality psychologists may know, or learn about, dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories, respectively. Traits provide a dispositional sketch of human individuality, adaptations fill in many of the details, and integrative stories tell what a person’s life may mean in the overall. As displayed in Table 4.1, personality itself may be construed as a unique and evolving arrangement of traits, adaptations, and stories situated in a particular social and historical context (McAdams, 2001a).

At Level 1, dispositional traits are broad, internal, and comparative features of human individuality that account for consistencies perceived or expected in behavior and experience from one situation to the next and over time. Typically assessed via self-report questionnaires or observer ratings, dispositional traits position an individual on a series of bipolar, linear continua that describe the most basic and general dimensions upon which persons are typically perceived to differ. A large and diffuse corpus of research suggests that individual differences in basic traits consistently predict behavioral trends (Matthews & Deary, 1998) and important life outcomes (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991). Trait scores show substantial heritability (Loehlin et al., 1998) and considerable stability over time, especially across the adult life course (Costa & McCrae, 1994; Roberts & Friend-Delvecchio, 2000).

In recent years, a consensus has emerged to suggest that most personality traits can be grouped into five large clusters, often called the Big Five: extraversion/introversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

At Level 2, characteristic adaptations are motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental facets of human individuality that are contextualized in time, place, or social role. They include current goals and motives, values and beliefs, coping strategies and mechanisms of defense, internalized representations of relationships, interests and domain-specific skills, developmental tasks, and other particularized features of personality that spell out the specific ways in which individuals adapt to the contingencies of daily life. Characteristic adaptations typically speak to what people want (or wish to avoid) in daily life and how they go about trying to get what they want (or avoid what they do not want) in particular situations and with respect to particular people, groups, organizations, and social roles (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990; Little, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Less stable and more contingent than dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details of human individuality and typically express much more directly than do traits the important ways in which people change over time.

If dispositional traits sketch the outline and characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details of human individuality, what is left to know in knowing persons? One thing that is left is meaning. What does a life mean? More specifically, what does a person’s life mean to the person? A growing number of social scientists have recently argued that individuals living in modern societies typically provide their lives with some sense of meaning and purpose by constructing internalized narratives of the self, or life stories (Cohler, 1982; Giddens, 1981; McAdams, 1985, 2001b; Polkinghorne, 1988). At Level 3 of personality, integrative life stories tell how a person reconstructs the past and anticipates the future as a narrative identity complete with self-defining scenes, characters, plots, and themes. Like traits and adaptations, the internalized and evolving stories that modern people work on are integral aspects of their personality. To know a person well is to know his or
Table 4.1 Three Levels of Personality (from McAdams, 2001a, p. 10)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Level 1: Dispositional Traits</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dispositional traits</td>
<td>Broad dimensions of personality that describe assumedly internal, global, and stable individual differences in behavior, thought, and feeling. Traits account for consistency in individual functioning across different situations and over time.</td>
<td>Friendliness, Dominance, Tendency toward depression, Punctuality</td>
<td>Being psychological concepts and theories to bear in painting a broad portrait of a person's life. Whatever other ideas they wish to explore, these authors would do well to delineate general cognitive, emotional, and behavioral trends in their subjects' lives in terms of the kinds of dispositional traits set forth in the Big Five scheme. Psychobiographers might begin by identifying those few traits within the Big Five framework upon which their subjects appear to exhibit a very high or very low position. (Table 4.2 presents one version of the Big Five framework.) The trait definitions provided in the Big Five are more precise and concrete than the casual and inconsistent attributions that are often made by biographers. By locating their subjects at precise points in a Big Five conceptual space, psychobiographers can offer their readers an easy-to-assimilate sketch of basic personality trends, a sketch that might be profitably compared to dispositional sketches offered by other biographers for the same and different subjects. (Such interbiography comparison might promote the kind of progress and interchange in the field of psychobiography envisioned by Runyan [1988], and it might also open up exchanges between psychobiographers and personality psychologists who study traits.) Psychobiographers can organize different incidents and tendencies in their subjects' lives within particular trait categories. More important, they can show the conditions under which a given subject may act in opposition to his or her dispositional profile. Traits are not absolutes; the highly extraverted person does not act in an outgoing and sociable manner in every situation in life. Gross or unexpected departures from a dispositional pattern are likely to be especially interesting in a psychobiography. Such departures may provide the biographer with a wonderful opportunity to explain something that on first blush may seem inexplicable. While dispositional profiles are indispensable for a full description of human individuality, they can also be useful as explanations. This is why it is important for psychobiographers to obtain some working knowledge of research on personality traits. Empirical studies document expected and sometimes surprising relationships between different traits, between traits and behavior, and between traits and important life outcomes. As just one example, research on extraversion consistently shows a positive link between this trait and experiences of positive affect. Not only are extraverts consistently more outgoing than introverts, but they also report more experiences in life (both social and non-social) that bring pleasure and joy (e.g., Lucas &amp; Diener, 2001). At the same time, extraverts do not report fewer experiences of negative affect than do introverts. (Negative emotional experiences seem more closely linked to the trait of neuroticism, which itself is independent of extraversion.) Some trait theorists group extraversion and the tendency toward positive affectivity within a single behavioral approach system whose brain correlates may include relatively higher cortical activity in</td>
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<td>Characteristic adaptations</td>
<td>More particular facets of personality that describe personal adaptations to motivational, cognitive, and developmental challenges and tasks. Characteristic adaptations are usually contextualized in time, place, situation, or social role.</td>
<td>Goals, motives, and life plans, Religious values and beliefs, Cognitive schemas, Psychosocial stages, Developmental tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life stories</td>
<td>Internalized and evolving narratives of the self that people incorporate to integrate the past, present, and future and provide life with some sense of unity, purpose, and meaning. Life stories address the problems of identity and integration in personality—problems especially characteristic of modern adulthood.</td>
<td>Earliest memory, Reconstruction of childhood, Anticipations of future self, &quot;Rags to riches&quot; stories</td>
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Table 4.2 The Big Five Trait Categories (after Costa & McCrae, 1994)

| E: Extraversion (vs. introversion) | Warmth |
| A: Agreeableness (vs. antagonism) | Trust, Straightforwardness |
| Conscientiousness (vs. unconscientiousness) | Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement striving, Self-discipline, Deliberation |
the left frontal regions and reward sensitivity mediated by the neurotransmitter dopamine (Revelle, 1993). Psychobiographers, therefore, might expect that their most extraverted subjects should have little trouble finding pleasure and joy in life. Again, deviations from this expected pattern would provide an interesting opportunity to explain why.

How do traits come to be? This question leads to a second, albeit negative, lesson that psychobiographers might draw from personality psychology: Shared family influences are not good explanations for the development of traits. Research on twins (identical and fraternal, raised together and apart) shows that at least half of the reliably measured variance in most personality trait distributions can be accounted for by genetic differences between people. In looking to explain the remaining portion of the variance, researchers have examined many different kinds of environmental influences. The search for simple environmental explanations for the development of traits has, so far, been a failure. While it is not clear how environments do influence traits, it is becoming increasingly clear that the kinds of simple family influences that common belief suggests are important for shaping personality traits—variables such as maternal or paternal warmth or discipline and other general characteristics of families that siblings in the family share—play almost no role.

Most students and many clinical psychologists simply do not believe the data here—data showing that shared environmental influences typically account for no more than 3% of the variability in trait scores (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). Let me translate this psychobiography: Erikson (1958) was probably wrong when he suggested that Martin Luther's tendency toward compulsivity (a trait of conscientiousness in the Big Five, perhaps with some neuroticism thrown in) was partly determined by the strictness Hans Luther showed as Martin's father. Hans may have been especially strict and authoritarian, and Martin may have developed similar traits, as well as compulsivity, as he grew older. But Luther's development with respect to these traits likely had little to do with the way Hans acted as a father. Indeed, the development of the traits probably had much more to do with the fact that Hans gave Luther something much more powerful for the shaping of traits—his genes.

Psychobiography would develop more valid explanations by looking outside the family, or to contingent patterns within the family, for environmental influences on traits. Many researchers today believe that nonsocial environments play an underappreciated role in the development of traits. Nonsocial environments include external factors that siblings in the same family do not share—such as peer groups, teachers, lucky breaks and fateful accidents, and the many environmental factors that seem to push children in the same family into different directions when it comes to personality traits. Indeed, some nonsocial environmental factors do play themselves out within the family, as well—such as birth order and differential treatment of children in the same family. In this regard, Freud's claim that he was "the indisputable favorite of his mother" (in Jones, 1961, p. 6) suggests, as Freud seemed to know, a defensible candidate for a nonsocial environmental influence in Freud's own life.

From childhood dimensions of temperament to stable individual differences in the adult years, traits may evolve according to a process that Caspi (1998) calls "developmental elaboration." The process is complex and many-faceted, but it is to its essentials it may go like this: Genotype types give rise to inborn differences in temperament; the social environment "responds" to those temperaments in ways that often (though not always) reinforce and articulate the dimensions that already exist. Temperament dimensions are further articulated and elaborated into full-fledged personality traits as the maturing person comes to select and construct his or her own environments in ways that are often (though not always) consistent with those trait dimensions, further reinforcing and articulating those same dimensions. To take a simple example, the baby owning a genotype that provides for a relatively cheerful and outgoing temperament elicits from the environment more smiles and social interaction than a more inhibited baby (blessed with a different kind of genotype) elicits from the environment, perhaps reinforcing and accentuating differences between the two babies. As the cheerful child sets out along a particular developmental pathway, he or she encounters many environments that are sympathetic with the tendency toward cheerfulness and outgoingness (in part because the child shares genes with the parent, who structure an environment that is consistent with their own—and ipso factio the child's—genotypes). As the little-extravert-to-be grows older, he or she chooses to spend more time with people and pursue more joy-inducing experiences than a little-introvert-to-be is likely to choose, by virtue of the fact that the extravert- and introvert-to-be are different both genetically and in terms of the environments that their genotypes have, as it were, engendered. And so it goes.

My example is oversimplified and suggests, unintentionally, that the inborn differences in temperament drive development the entire way. In reality, many different environmental factors may compete with each other in the elaboration of inborn differences, leading to unexpected and interesting developmental pathways. After all, not all cheerful one-year-olds grow up to be extraverts. Nonetheless, psychobiographers need to trace the many different environmental influences that may shape traits over the long haul. In tracing the development of dispositional traits, psychobiographers would do well, therefore, to look beyond singular events and downplay shared family environments in favor of explanations that show how early temperament differences are elaborated and articulated into full-fledged dispositional traits over time.

An example from the life of Mary McCarthy illustrates an approach that is compatible with this point of view (Gelderman, 1988). Born in 1912, McCarthy lived her first six years with two parents who cherished her and valued her assertive temperament style. In 1918, within 24 hours, both her parents died during the great influenza epidemic. For the next five years, Mary and her three younger brothers stayed with her paternal grandmother's sister and that woman's husband. Living with this couple, the Shivers, was a nightmare for Mary. They showed no affection for her, and they strongly discouraged her outgoing and domineering ways. The Shivers beat the children regularly and forbid Mary from playing with the neighborhood kids. It is likely that Mary's strong-minded and unyielding tendencies antagonized the Shivers further, motivating them to be especially harsh and controlling with her. After five years, Mary's maternal grandparents learned what was going on, and they arranged for Mary to come live with them. Again, the environment changed dramatically. The grandparents were kind and indulgent, but they were unable to give Mary the undivided attention she craved. With her grandparents, Mary seemed to become less assertive overall in that she no longer faced an authority at home against whom to rebel. But she also became more rebellious at school. In sum, Mary's temperamental style evolved over a decade or so as it shaped and was shaped by the different kinds of environments she encountered and engendered. Her sunny assertiveness grew darker over time. It also grew more selective as it morphed into a tendency toward defiance in the face of oppressive authority.

Level 2: Characteristic Adaptations

The two greatest strengths of the trait concept—breed and stability—double as its two biggest weaknesses. As broad dispositions that account for general consistencies in behavior across many
different situations, traits are not well equipped to describe or explain inconsistencies, contingencies, and particularities (Thorne, 1989). Traits help in accounting for what a person will do, think, or feel in general, but they do not and cannot provide the kind of detail, context, and dynamics that may be required to describe precisely what a person does, thinks, or feels in a particular situation, and why. As relatively stable individual differences that demonstrate substantial longitudinal continuity over the adult life course, traits do not go very far in accounting for personality change and development. It is true that mean levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness appear to increase slightly while neuroticism may decrease slightly from early to middle adulthood (Helson & Khoshn, 1998). But these normative developmental patterns in broad traits do not capture the many other nuanced ways in which persons change and grow over time. A full accounting of human individuality should begin with traits. But it can not end there.

Over the past 20 years, personality psychologists have made impressive strides in measuring and understanding motives, goals, strategies, beliefs, values, interests, schemas, and a range of other characteristic adaptations in an effort to account for what traits cannot account for. The various approaches they have developed travel under many different names—for example, social-cognitive theory (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990), cognitive-affective systems theory (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991), life span motivational approaches (Freud & Halles, 2000), personal action psychology (Little, 1999), conceptualizations of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-identity (Ogilvie & Asmone, 1991), and various developmental approaches that emphasize stages, seasons, or trajectories in the life course. The different research programs these approaches have generated emphasize many different concerns, but they almost all share an interest in the contextualized particularities of human lives and how those particularities can change, in both predictable and unpredictable ways, over time.

What might biographers take away from the sprawling literature on characteristic adaptations in personality? A first lesson is readily derived from the distinction between adaptations (Level 2) and traits (Level 1): Meaningful personality change in the adult years is more likely to occur in people's goals, motives, beliefs, and strategies rather than in the broad outlines of their behavioral, cognitive, and affective styles. On this disconnection, traits, characteristic adaptations are more strongly and directly shaped by environmental contingencies, developmental demands, and social roles, especially in the adult years. As a person's social world changes over time, it should not be surprising to find that his or her motives, goals, beliefs, and strategies may also change. For example, Oscar Wilde's overall style of interacting with others seemed to change little over his life (dispositional traits); yet he came, over time and chiefly because of his experiences in prison, to despise the same shallowness and artificiality that he once had made the basis of his philosophy of the artistic life (Schulz, 2001).

A more recent example is Ronald Reagan. Under the influence of his new wife, Nancy, Reagan transformed himself from a moderate liberal to a champion of political conservatism (Morris, 1999). The content of his beliefs, as well as his life goals, changed markedly in Reagan's 30s and 40s. Interestingly, what may not have changed at all was the overall style of his thought—a tendency to make sense of the world with a few strong principles while overlooking complexity and contradictions. At Level 1 of personality, Ronald Reagan remained relatively low on the dispositional trait of openness to experience. At Level 2, however, he transformed himself from a pro-union liberal searching for Hollywood stardom to a staunch conservative who sought and achieved high public office—a personality change that was of no small import for the history of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

The case of Ronald Reagan raises the question of what indeed constitutes change in personality. Some psychologists might argue that a shift in political values and life goals is too superficial or limited to constitute a "real" personality change. Indeed, some trait psychologists have suggested the same (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1994). They see broad dispositional variables as the fundamental dimensions of personality. From this point of view, characteristic adaptations are nothing more than situationally informed derivatives of basic traits. I believe, however, that this view is unrealistic and wrongheaded. It is unrealistic because in decreasing that dispositional traits are the only "real" dimensions of personality and showing that these dimensions are increasingly stable as people age, the trait-in-everything viewpoint sets the bar too high for personality change. Changes in characteristic adaptations may often represent important personal transformations that have a huge impact on people's self-conceptions and on the social ecologies within which their lives are situated. Indeed, a great deal of what constitutes change in psychotherapy is change in goals, strategies, and beliefs. The prioritization of traits is wrongheaded, furthermore, because research shows conclusively that motives, goals, beliefs, and other characteristic adaptations do not map neatly onto personality traits (Winter et al., 1998). Level 2 in personality is not just more specific than Level 1. It is also different in kind. It deals with the kind of motivational, cognitive-social, developmental, and strategic aspects of individuality that do not find a clear expression in the language of dispositional traits.

The language of Level 2 is a language of contingency, context, change, conflict, and complexity. It is a language that speaks to the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics of daily action. It is a language that accommodates psychoanalytic conceptualizations, but only to a point. Contemporary research on strivings and goals, for example, explores the kinds of motivational dynamics and conflicts that have always been at the heart of the psychoanalytic tradition (Emmons & King, 1988; Little, 1999). Attachment research explores internalized object representations of the sort described by Fairbairn and Kohut (Main et al., 1985). Personality and cognition researchers have recast the distinction between conscious and unconscious functioning into one between explicit (on-line, cold, slow but precise) and implicit (off-line, hot, fast but impressionistic) functioning, supporting a crucial Freudian insight (Epstein, 1994). At the same time, however, contemporary research on characteristic adaptations departs from most psychoanalytic approaches—and indeed most of the grand theories of personality proposed in the first half of the twentieth century—in at least one very important aspect: domain specificity.

The trend in findings from studies of characteristic adaptations is away from the universal processes and integrative mechanisms featured so prominently in Freud, Jung, Adler, Horney, Sullivan, Kohut, Rogers, Maslow, and Allport and toward specific manifestations in particular domains (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990; Little, 1999). Many social-cognitive approaches to personality, for example, view persons as complex, multitasking organisms who solve many different problems and work on many different life projects at the same time and over time. These approaches look skeptically upon broad assertions regarding basic needs, fundamental complexes, or universal patterns of human individuality. Instead, human beings have evolved to meet many different and competing demands and agendas (Tooby & Cosmas, 1992). No single goal, schema, defense mechanism, motivational pattern, or value cluster provides the key, integrative construct for understanding the person. Furthermore, the multiple and conflicting demands of modern life ask people to play many different and conflicting roles (Geer, 1992). Characteristic adaptations are defined and lived out in particular contexts—a coping strategy that is used in one kind of situation (when interacting with strangers) but not others; a goal that drives behavior during one period of life (adolescence) but not another (middle life); a set of beliefs that proves serviceable when assuming social role A (leadership positions) but not social roles B, C, and D. Biographers often describe multiple roles and orientations in their subjects' lives. For example, biographers of Abraham Lincoln have marveled at the many different and seemingly contradictory persons he adopted over time—from the rail splitter of his youth, to itinerant lawyer, to local politician, to presidential candidate, to commander-in-chief of the Union forces in the Civil War (e.g., Donald, 1995). A common interpretive strategy for dealing with this kind of multiplicity is to search for some form of hidden unity that lies beneath the diversity. The different roles and orientations may be seen as surface or manifest characteristics that can be explained away by invoking deeper, latent forces. Research
on characteristic adaptations, however, suggests the possibility that some lives defy explanations invoking deep unity, that some individuals really are contradictory, that some self-constructions really are multiple and contingent.

Research on characteristic adaptations provide us with wealth of constructs and insights that might be creatively employed in making psychological sense of multiplicity and contingency. As one example, de St. Aalin (1998) drew from research and theory on the Level 2 concept of generativity—the midlife concern for and commitment to promoting future generations—to explore Frank Lloyd Wright's development as an architect and as a father. De St. Aalin showed how Wright expressed generativity in multiple and confusing ways in different life domains and how both his greatest successes and his greatest failures in life reflected contradictions in his characteristic approach to generativity.

The lesson here for psychobiographers is clear: Motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental interpretations of the single life must allow for multiplicity, contradiction, and donuts specificity. The psychobiographer who looks for a common or core set of motives, goals, strategies, or beliefs—especially a fundamental psychological pattern derived from childhood—runs the risk of oversimplifying the subject and ignoring contingency, context, change, and the local specificities of the particularized life. Research on characteristic adaptations cautions against grand efforts to find the one “key” idea to explain the single life. Yet the drive to provide this kind of reductionistic explanation for a full life is powerful. Readers expect biographers to develop a psychological thesis for the case; they expect a clear, take-home message. Psychological theory is supposed to make a confusing life understandable.

But the most skilled psychobiographers formulate interpretations that show multiple variations on a set of well-defined themes. The variations are just as important as the themes, for it is typically the variations that reveal the intricately contextualized and contingent nature of a life. Level 3: Integrative Life Stories

As research on dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations has proceeded apace over the past 20 years, a growing number of personality psychologists have turned their attention to a third way of thinking about human individuality. Beginning with Tomkins’s (1979) script theory, personality psychologists started to appreciate and consider the role of narrative in human lives. Tomkins conceived of the person as a playwright who, from birth onward, constructs scenes and scripts in life in order to magnify emotion and make meaning over time. From Tomkins’s perspective, life is organized and narrated as if it were an ongoing story, complete with settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. Emphasizing similar ideas, McAdams (1985) formulated a life-story model of identity, contending that individuals living in modern societies begin to construct and internalize integrative life narratives in late adolescence and young adulthood and continue to work on these identity stories into the later years of the life course. Singer and Salovey (1993) identified self-defining memories as key autobiographical scenes in the life story—episodes that capture vivid emotional experiences and express unresolved identity issues. Hermans (1996) formulated an influential dialogical theory of construct personality as a polyphonic novel giving voice to multiple faces of the self. An upsurge of interest in narrative theories (e.g., Barret & Jickes, 1997) and narrative-based methodologies (Craig, 1997) in personality psychology today dovetails with an interdisciplinary movement in the social sciences called the narrative study of lives (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Josselson et al., 2003; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). The narrative study of lives seeks to write, interpret, and disseminate people’s life stories with an eye toward understanding what those stories say about the people themselves and about culture.

At Level 3 in personality, a life story is the developing person’s own internalized and evolving narrative of the self. From the standpoint of the subject, it is the story of my life as I see it. The life story is subjective in two senses. First, it is the subject’s own narrative construction of self—and not the construction or interpretation offered by an observer, be that observer the subject’s mother or biographer. Second, the life story departs markedly from any kind of objective chronicle of a person’s past in that it selects and constructs only those events from the past that the subject deems worthy of selection and construction, and links those events to an imagined future. The life story, therefore, is more like a personal myth than an objective biography (McAdams, 1993), even though the subject believes the story to be true. Indeed, the story can be, in a psychological sense, it aims to give a coherent sense of who (and why) a person is, was, and will be. Among other functions, life stories reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in ways that provide an individual with some semblance of meaning and direction in life. Life stories provide much of what Erikson defined as ego identity. They tell a person who he or she is, was, and may be; they spell out how a person is similar to and different from others; they integrate a life in time; they help to specify a psychosocial niche in the world; they consolidate choices and commitments; they make a particular life sensible and reliable in a world— the modern world—wherein many different lives might be lived and many different stories told. Beginning in late adolescence and young adulthood, then, life stories provide modern men and women with narrative identities.

What might psychobiographers draw from narrative theory and research in personality psychology and the narrative study of lives? The fact is, most psychobiographers already keenly appreciate narrative. Indeed, they are storytellers themselves. Psychobiography may even be defined as “the systematic use of psychological (especially personality) theory to transform a life into a coherent and illuminating story” (McAdams, 1988, p. 2). Referring to his monumental biography of Henry James, Edel (1978) wrote that when “the biographer can discover a myth, he has found his story. He knows the meaning of his material and can choose, select, sift, without deceiving himself about the subject of his work” (p. 2). But the interpretive story the psychobiographer tells about his or her subject is not necessarily the same as the story the subject might tell—that is, the third-person narrative that becomes a psychobiography itself is not synonymous with the subject’s (first-person) narrative identity. Indeed, the two may conflict dramatically, as when the biographer maintains that the subject was deceiving him- or herself, and perhaps others, in maintaining a “false” sense of self. Relatedly, individuals may sometimes invent characters and make up false stories about their own lives, as in the case of Lillian Hellman (1973), who seems to have created events for her memoir, Pentimento (1973), that simply never happened. It is, of course, the biographer’s literary right to prioritize his or her own narrative interpretation over and against what the biographer imagines the subject’s own story might have been. But Lillian Hellman notwithstanding, the biographer should not be too quick to ignore or dismiss a subject’s narrative identity. I would argue that good psychobiography needs to incorporate what the psychobiographer imagines to be the subject’s own narrative identity, along with what the psychobiographer imagines to be the subject’s traits and characteristic adaptations.

An important lesson regarding Level 3 in personality, therefore, is this: Psychobiographers’ third-person accounts of their subjects’ lives should aim to uncover, interpret, incorporate, and critique subjects’ first-person narrative identities; the story the psychobiographer tells should creatively engage the story the psychobiographer thinks the subject told. For some psychobiographies, the aim may be to make explicit a story that the subject tells or told implicitly. In looking for the subject’s narrative identity, psychobiographers should pay closer attention to late adolescence and adulthood, and perhaps less than they commonly pay to the earliest years. McAdams’s (1985, 1993) life-story model of identity suggests that experiences in infancy and childhood provide material for the life story, but the life story itself does not begin to take shape until society demands that a person begin to formulate a meaningful and coherent life—in modern societies, late adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Furthermore, cognitive developmental research shows that the skills necessary for creating a narrative identity are not consolidated until the late-adolescent years (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In late adolescence and young adulthood, people living in modern societies put together aspects of their lived and imagined experience with those cultural narratives that they find most compelling or imposing to create unique life stories. The stories are influenced by early experience to be sure, but
they are just as much products of personal agency and culture (Franz & Stewart, 1994; Gregg, 1991). Psychosocially constructed, edited, updated, and reformulated over time, narrative identities are personal and cultural texts—written, read, and lived in an evolving cultural context characterized by its own favored, and suppressed, modes of discourse about what it means to live a life worth living.

Life-narrative research suggests a number of different interpretive frames for analyzing, classifying, and critiquing life stories. For example, McAdams (1985, 1993) identifies the dimensions of narrative tone, theme, and complexity. Tone refers to the overall emotional quality of a story, ranging from the optimism and joy found in comedy and romance to the darker affective expressions of tragedy and satire. Stories with a generally positive affective tone suggest that characters are born into a world that is fundamentally secure and that, despite obstacles along the way, the plots of their lives will result in happy endings. Stories with a more negative tone signal danger and distrust, especially in the early chapters, and they lead the reader to expect that even the noblest strivings or yearnings in life will be frustrated in the end.

Spelling out what characters strive to accomplish in stories, narrative themes (or thematic lines; McAdams, 1985) may be classified according to Bakan's (1966) distinction between agency and communion. Agentic themes are about self-expansion, achievement, power, and the like; communion is about the strivings for love, friendship, and community. Personality researchers have developed ways to measure agentic and communal themes in life-narrative accounts, and they have conducted studies linking these themes to other characteristics of personality and life outcomes (e.g., McAdams et al., 1996; Wolke, 1993). For example, research suggests that individuals with strong power motives (Level 2 in personality) tend to create life stories prioritizing the agentic themes of self-mastery, impact, and personal accomplishment, whereas individuals high in intimacy motivation tend to create more communal life stories emphasizing romantic love, friendship, interpersonal dialogue, and caring for others.

Tone and theme go to the content of life stories; complexity refers to life-story structure. Complex life stories incorporate a larger number of plots and characters and articulate a greater number of distinctions than do simpler life stories. Research suggests that individuals who show higher levels of ego development (Levinger, 1983) and score higher on measures of openness to experience tend to craft more complex autobiographical accounts, compared to those lower in ego development and openness to experience (McAdams, 1985; McAdams et al., 2004).

Another interpretive construct for making sense of life stories is the personal "imago" (McAdams, 1985). An imago is an idealized personification of the self that functions as a main character in the life story. (This usage of the term may be contrasted to Jung's, who viewed the imago as akin to a universal archetype of the collective unconscious; in McAdams's theory, imagoes are highly personalized and culturally shaped personifications of selfhood.) In modern society, people's life stories often contain more than one imago, as if the self were partitioned into multiple protagonists (McAdams, 1985) or voices (Hermans, 1996). Each imago expresses its own values, beliefs, goals, roles, and preferred modes of interaction. While one imago may take center stage during, say, an early chapter in the life story (e.g., "the lover," "the warrior"), another may assume prominence later in the story ("the sage," "the peacemaker"). The interaction and conflict between and among different imaginges helps to structure a story's plot and define the key contrasts, obstacles, and challenges in a life story (see also Gregg, 1991). Furthermore, by implicitly constructing a narrative identity with multiple imaginges, the individual expresses what postmodern theorists such as Gergen (1992) call the multiplicty of contemporary selfhood within a single story of the self. In this way, especially integrative life stories solve the perennial identity problem, identified by William James, of the self's need to be many things and one thing at the same time (Knowles & Sibicky, 1990).

In his biography of Alfred Hitchcock, Spoto (1983) identifies two main characters, or imaginges, that define a central conflict in the famous director's life story. One protagonist is the consummate perfectionist, bold and meticulous, who mastered and revolutionized the craft of film making. The other is the 300-pound gluton, crude and alienated, who was a physical slob and an emotional cripple. Spoto argues that these two personifications are revealed in the many instances in his films in which Hitchcock sets up antagonistic doubles. The duality also played itself out in Hitchcock's ambivalent treatment of women. Leading ladies such as Grace Kelly and Kim Novak played roles as flawless paragons of feminine elegance, but women were also savagely raped, mutilated, and debased, as in the famous shower scene in Psycho and the last attack on Tippi Hedren in The Birds. Hitchcock also projected the two self-personifications onto his two favorite leading men—Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart. Grant represented the suave and sophisticated man of the world who always got the girl. By contrast, Stewart was the terror of murder in Rope, the chair-bound voyeur in Rear Window, and the obsessed and guilt-ridden pursuer of romance in Vertigo. While Grant personified the consummate perfectionist who made his way in the world with style and grace, Stewart hinted at the darker imago of the brooding, inept fat boy, a character who, Spoto maintains, dominated the life story in Hitchcock's childhood chapters and then made its way back to center stage in the director's final years.

Going back to Tomkins (1979), life-narrative researchers have paid close attention to those particular scenes or episodes that stand out within the story in bold print (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Tomkins was especially intrigued by what he called nuclear scenes. Typically appearing in childhood chapters of the life story, nuclear scenes begin with positive emotion, often as the child interacts with trusted others in a way that initially provides "stimulation, guidance, mutualy, support, comfort, and/or reassurance." But things turn suddenly bad with the appearance of "an intimidation, or a contamination, or a confusion, or any combination of these which jeopardize the good scene" (Tomkins, 1987, p. 199). What begins, therefore, as joyful or exciting turns frightening, disgusting, contemptuous, shameful, or sad. Tomkins suggested that nuclear scenes can lead to larger nuclear scripts, which are broader life-story patterns formed in an effort to reverse the nuclear scene, to turn the bad scene into a good scene again. In some life stories, however, the attempt to undo the contamination is, at best, only partially successful, and the protagonist ultimately appears fated to repeat the pattern of the nuclear scene again and again. Not surprisingly, life-narrative research suggests that contaminated nuclear scenes of the sort described by Tomkins are associated with depression and lower levels of self-reported mental health (McAdams et al., 2001).

If some life stories narrate the move from good to bad, others tell how bad events eventually turn good. In a redemption sequence, a character in the life story is delivered from suffering to an enhanced, emotionally positive state (McAdams et al., 2001). Redemption sequences are positively associated with self-reported mental health, and among midlife American adults they are positively linked to generativity, or a strong concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams et al., 1997). In the same way that contaminated childhood scenes may suggest broader nuclear scripts (Tomkins, 1987), strong redemption sequences may signify broader life-narrative patterns or story types. Research on the life stories of highly generative—that is, especially productive and caring—midlife American adults shows that the redemptive sequences readily found in these narrative identities are often accompanied by the following: (1) a childhood sense of feeling special or advantaged; (2) an early sensitivity to the suffering or oppression of others; (3) the consolidation of a simple but compelling personal ideology in adolescence and the commitment to that ideology through the adult years; (4) tension between agentic and communal strivings in adulthood; and (5) anticipating growth and fruition for the future.

Described in Table 4.3, McAdams (in press) labels this life-narrative pattern the redemptive self. The redemptive self may represent a characteristically American way of narrating a caring and productive life at midlife. As highly generative American adults shape their lives into redemptive narratives, they implicitly draw upon
Second, the prototypical scene may help the psychobiographer generate new hypotheses and insights for the psychobiography itself. Schultz is aware that the story the psychobiographer ultimately tells is not synonymous with the subject of the psychobiography may have told about his or her own life over time. But exploring what that latter story might have been can actually enhance the former, providing the psychobiographer with conceptual tools to enrich and deepen the interpretation of the single life.

Conclusion

Once upon a time, personality psychology had little more to offer the world beyond the grand personality theories proposed in the first half of the twentieth century. Grouped under broad paradigmatic rubrics such as “psychoanalysis” (Freud, Jung, Adler, Horney, Sullivan, Erikson), “humanism” (Allport, Rogers, May, Maslow), factor theories (Cattell, Guilford, Eysenck), and “behaviorism” (Miller & Dollard, Skinner, Bandura), these all-purpose theories provided authoritative statements about human nature, individual differences, and personality development (see Hall & Lindzey, 1957). That these frameworks enjoyed very little scientific support did not temper their adherents. Each theory offered a comprehensive viewpoint that might be pitched against its rivals; to choose one (e.g., existentialism) was often to reject another (e.g., social learning theory). Psychobiographers and others aiming to use a psychological lens to apprehend the individual life looked to these broad theories for guidance and insight. In that the psychoanalytic tradition offered the richest theories and the most innovative concepts for understanding the individual life, it should come as no surprise that psychobiographers drew most heavily on the writings of Freud and those depth psychologists who followed him. That they continue to do so speaks both to the continued viability of the psychoanalytic tradition and to the intellectual disconnect between psychobiography and personality psychology today. This chapter takes aim at that disconnect.

It no longer makes any sense, if indeed it ever did, to think of personality psychology as being nearly divided into alternative theoretical schools or camps, each with its own view of human nature, individual differences, and personality change. Although some undergraduate textbooks in personality still daintily trot out each grand theorist one chapter at a time, scientific research and theorizing in the field of personality psychology looks nothing like these books. Instead, research and theorizing center on a wide range of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life-story issues that together present an impressive and exciting array of concepts heretofore untested by psychobiographers.

The constructs I have featured in this chapter—dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life stories—hold one huge advantage over yesterday’s grand theories, including the psychoanalytic frameworks most favored by psychobiographers. In a word, the advantage is science. I have focused on personality concepts that are embedded in a rich and evolving scientific discourse, wherein constructs are operationalized, hypotheses tested, and theories are continually reformed and refined as a result of consensually validated rules of discovery, inference, and justification. I do not ask that psychobiographers draw all their insights from the scientific study of human individuality. Psychobiographers should feel free to tap many different intellectual sources—from feminism and critical theory to psychoanalysis to evolutionary psychology. My more modest aim is merely to suggest that psychobiographers begin to look in the direction of a scientific field with which they should have some affinity, that they begin to take seriously the proposition that contemporary research and theorizing in personality psychology might help to inform their best efforts to make sense of the individual life. The field of personality psychology itself has recently begun to consider biographical assessments, case-based methods, and other approaches to inquiry that would seem near and dear to the psychobiographer’s craft. Psychobiographers might wish to return the favor.

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