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Psychobiography and Postmodernism: From Galton to Gergen

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Title: Psychobiography and Postmodernism: From Galton to Gergen

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Abstract. This article comments on a recent psychobiographical analysis and methodological critique concerning the life of Francis Galton (Fancher, 1998).

As political psychology must wrestle with the epistemological conundrums and scientific complexities of identifying psychological constructs with political utility, psychobiographers often are confronted with a sea of usual and useful suspects. But how to choose among them?

As intimated in a previous IBPP article (1996), a psychobiographer may only find criteria for what not to do or for yet additional suspects that cry out for criteria. From the first modern psychobiographies of Sigmund Freud to the present, one learns to avoid (1) opinions based on a single fact, (2) an overall viewpoint which in general pathologizes the person or situation, (3) idealization of the person or situation, and (4) strong conclusions based on inadequate data. From an eminent psychobiographer like Alan Elms, one learns that an act or event may serve three different psychological functions. First, it may be expressive of some need, instinct, desire, motivational pattern, conflict, sense of satisfaction or other trait or characteristic. Second, it may be defensive, meaning it at least partially satisfies or elicits in some distorted fashion any of the above traits or characteristics with which the person is in conflict, and, in fact, is unconscious of. Third, it may be restitutive and actually help people become more aware of conflict, its complexity and ramifications, and may resolve conflict in a manner which strengthens overall personality functioning and even character.

So, how to choose? Raymond Fancher of York University posits that the psychobiographer "must inevitably be eclectic and opportunistic rather than systematic in applying specific personality theories to his or her subject" (p. 99). In his very interesting discussion of Francis Galton, Fancher goes on to state that "the most useful personality theories offer general hints regarding certain aspects of experience or patterns of development that are likely to be of unusual importance or interest, if one can obtain the appropriate data" (p. 113). Thus Adler on birth order, Freud on sexuality, Erikson on psychosocial tasks, and Harry Stack Sullivan or M. Klein on early relationships with the mother could be useful depending on what data are available to the psychobiographer.

However, there are problems with this approach. The available data may be the least significant to the subject of a psychobiography. The psychological constructs and theories applied to available data may be related as to content, e.g., birth order, but lacking requisite validity to the available data--or, indeed, any data. And although Fancher rightly notes that personality theories are not formally predictive systems, are not falsifiable, and must share robustness with many nonpsychological perspectives, what are we left with? It would seem only the postmodernist criterion of narrative resonance dependent on the reader (cf. Gergen, 1992).

Fancher extends a valuable tradition of psychobiographical analysis. But is this all there is? As IBPP has previously described: the very endeavor of psychobiography is viewed with suspicion, even derision, in the eyes of many objective personality assessment experts and psychologists who question the validity of the construct of personality or who espouse a belief that personality, if it might be valid, is mostly a

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matter of external situations, not internal traits. Regardless of what approach to developing knowledge one explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly espouses, all of us—including psychobiographers and their subjects—are prisoners of our own theories. Whether we are premodernists, modernists, or postmodernists, these theories describe how the world works, as well as how it has and could work.

And thus analyses of Galton's *Memories of My Life* might be no more than memories of our own. (See Elms, A. C. (1994.) *Uncovering lives: The uneasy alliance of biography and psychology*. NY: Oxford University Press; Fancher, R.E. (1998). *Biography and psychodynamic theory: Some lessons from the life of Francis Galton*. *History of Psychology*, 1, 99-115; Freud, S. (1910.) *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood*. *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 11, 59-138; Gergen, K.J. (1992). *Toward a postmodern psychology*. In S. Kvale (Ed.), *Psychology and postmodernism* (pp. 17-31). London: Sage; Gergen, K.J., Comer-Fisher, D., & Hepburn, A. (1986). *Hermeneutics of personality description*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 1261-1270; Lasswell, H. (1930.) *Psychopathology and politics*. The University of Chicago Press; *Psychobiography and politics*. (November 8, 1996). *IBPP*, 1(2); Runyan, W. M. (Ed.) (1982.) *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. NY: Oxford University Press.) (Keywords: Interpretation, Psychobiography.)