

12-18-1998

Psychohistory and Personality Assessment by Proxy: Comments on Ritzler and Singer (1998)

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>



Part of the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1998) "Psychohistory and Personality Assessment by Proxy: Comments on Ritzler and Singer (1998)," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 24 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol5/iss24/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

Title: Psychohistory and Personality Assessment by Proxy: Comments on Ritzler and Singer (1998)

Author: Editor

Volume: 5

Issue: 24

Date: 1998-12-18

Keywords: Proxy, Psychohistory, Psychological Assessment, Typology

Abstract. This article comments on the psychohistorical use of the "MMPI-2 by proxy" technique that is described by Long Island University's Barry Ritzler and Meredith Singer in the October 1998 Issue of the *Journal of Personality Assessment*.

Introduction. Ritzler and Singer (1998) have demonstrated a "Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) by proxy" technique as a possible personality assessment contribution to psychohistory. The technique entails psychologists' (1) creating self-statements of an historical figure from that figure's autobiographical data; (2) completing the MMPI-2 as if they were the historical figure based on the self-statements; (3) scoring the MMPI-2--i.e., basic and content scales, T scores--as if the historical figure had completed the inventory; (4) developing personality descriptors and inferences about the historical figure based on combinations of qualitative and quantitative analyses of the MMPI-2 responses. Ritzler and Singer illustrated this technique with autobiographical data written by an historical figure, Rudolph Hoess (Hoss), who was a commandant of Auschwitz.

Comments on the Demonstration.

Psychohistory is based on the notion that psychological concepts may have some value in understanding and/or explaining historical phenomena and/or possible causal factors. Although contemporary readers often associate psychohistory with psychoanalytic and psychodynamic explanations, one must note that famed historians, political philosophers, poets, as well as the anonymous toilers of the everyday world have employed psychological explanations of history literally for thousands of years (e.g., Breasted, 1959; Confucius, 1992; Homer, 1951). Thus, psychohistory has maintained a certain face validity--although that face validity may merely be a manifestation of false consciousness (Jost, 1995). Ritzler and Singer are employing by proxy an objective psychological instrument with a different foundation of validity--one based on an actuarial model relating empiricism and rationalism.

Is the actuarial approach applied to the historical figures studied in psychohistory appropriate? Although very strong cases have been made for the superiority of the actuarial to so-called clinical approaches in personality assessment (e.g., Grove and Meehl, 1996), the study of historical figures--with that historical figure somehow having risen in interest above the temporally contiguous and anonymous individuals of everyday life--may present a special case. The actuarial approach of the MMPI-2 is ipso facto based on the assumption that historical figures are not psychologically distinct from anonymous individuals--the assumption being reflected by choice of samples included in the inventory's standardization. For example, certain demographic types constituting combinations of socially constructed race and ethnicity are marked for special comparisons, while historical import is not. The latter should be considered as an uncontrolled variable of unknown significance--especially as individuals may already have attained historical significance at time of testing, lost it, or have it ahead in their futures. At least implicitly, Ritzler and Singer have a priori answered long-studied and still-studied questions bearing on the similarity between historical figures and anonymous individuals--e.g., whether history chooses the individual who will walk the historical stage, whether historical figures have "something about them" that marks them

for the stage regardless of the historical moment, whether there is a significant interaction between the individual and the historical moment and, if so, what kind--and so on.

In fact, actuarial approaches to psychological issues--although not that of comprehensive and global personality assessment--based on samples of historical figures have been accomplished by social scientists (e.g., Simonton, 1997; Sulloway, 1995; & Tetlock, 1996). From self-statements developed from these and related data could arise standardization samples of historical figures for the MMPI-2 or any objective or projective instrument.

A caveat. There is at least one postmodern counter to the proposed need of exploring possible differences between historical figures and anonymous individuals before application by proxy of an instrument that has not been standardized on historical figures. The counter is that the very nature of what and who historical figures are is renegotiated through time (cf. Evans, 1998). Following the current intellectual fads generated by Foucault (1965) and Habermas (1973), one might conclude that social discourses change, not the people subjugated by them. This counter, however, might render the notion of historical figure as different than anonymous individual as either moot or hopelessly complex--either way mitigating against impelling empirical research with all its strengths and weaknesses.

Leaving the issue of historical figures, one must also note that the superiority of actuarial over clinical approaches seems most contested over decisions about (1) an individual as opposed to groups of individuals (cf. Faust, 1997; Masling, 1997) and (2) psychological variables most subject to socio-historical forces (cf. Schwartz, 1990). The former suggests that actuarial approaches should be applied to public policy development and less so to policy implementation in specific cases. The former also reflects the classical statistical aphorism that the smaller the N, the larger group differences must be to achieve statistical, if not practical significance for applying the general to the specific. Moreover, the former is also a product of the preponderance of normative over ipsative research in personality assessment research.

The latter reflects personality assessment's relative neglect of situational, environmental, and ecological factors as robust effectors and constructors of personality. It also reflects an appalling degree of acontextualism among many psychologists concerning the social, cultural, political, and historical situatedness of accepted research methodologies. Thus, Ritzler and Singer's dependence on the actuarial may be least defensible in matters of psychohistory.

Apart from issues of concerning the nature of historical figures and the actuarial-clinical discourse, one might ponder whether the standardization and correlate research data on which the MMPI-2 is founded are appropriate in matters of psychohistory. One might surmise that the greater the temporal gap between an historical figure and the standardization of an assessment device, the less interpretive validity one might expect. One might counter that there is not necessarily a linear, negative correlation between temporal gap and interpretive validity--that the correlation may be nonlinear, or fluctuate between linear to nonlinear, or fluctuate between negative and positive. However, the very effort to restandardize assessment instruments in the personality assessment field seems to at least implicitly assume that temporal gap and interpretive validity are negatively correlated. Another research tradition bearing on the above comprises the challenge of the social transformation of knowledge (Gergen, 1991) that may increasingly endanger assessment reliability and validity as time from standardization increases. Accepting the notion of testing by proxy, one might better defend the choice of MMPI--standardized while the historical figure in question, Rudolph Hoess, was at his zenith (or nadir depending on one's moral perspective)--as opposed to the MMPI-2.

So far, the nature of the data employed by Ritzler and Singer has not been addressed. This has been an oversight because--as with all forms of assessment--reliability and validity of interpretations will be significantly dependent on similar qualities of the data subject to analysis. In the case of Hoss, he wrote his autobiographical fragment in German while incarcerated and while facing capital punishment--probably within six months of his execution. Ritzler and Singer rely on one of two (and only two to my knowledge) English-language sources of the fragment: the 1959 work entitled *Commandant of Auschwitz: The autobiography of Rudolf Hoess*, as opposed to the 1992 source entitled *Death Dealer: The memoirs of the SS Commandant at Auschwitz*. I have spoken with several Holocaust survivors who wish to remain anonymous who believe that much of Hoss' account is fabricated. Regardless of the truth of these survivors' comments, however, psychologists should deeply ponder the appropriateness of applying MMPI-2 interpretive strategies to translated data obtained from the socio-historical and legal situation in which Hoss found himself.

Readers might wonder about how revolutionary is the notion of formal assessment "by proxy." The notion has long been commonly used, if "by proxy" one refers to assessment without applying objective and projective instruments but instead implicit and explicit theories, models, and frameworks applied to first and second-hand accounts of behaviors and physical characteristics. In clinical approaches to assessment therapists have long developed profiles of significant others in their patients' and clients' lives--significant others whom therapists never meet. Therapists also may develop profiles of patients and clients whom are unable to or refuse to complete assessment instruments. Some forensic psychologists develop profiles of crime perpetrators based on crime scene and related data. For clinical and counseling psychologists who eschew objective and projective assessment, the way of assessment by proxy is the only way.

Somewhat further afield--as mentioned above--social scientists have similarly developed psychological analyses and typologies of historical figures as did Sigmund Freud (1910) and Harold Lasswell (1930). And for thousands of years--before the social sciences formally constituted academic disciplines--military and political strategists and philosophers engaged in assessment by proxy (Kautilya, 1994; Liu, 1996; Machiavelli, 1940; Thucydides, 1967). And assessment by proxy is what most lay psychologists do.

If assessment by proxy refers to an indirect but formal method to assess personality, one would quickly discover a long research tradition of employing a technique that overtly requires an assessee to assess someone or something else besides the assessee--even though the responses will be applied to the assessee. The Thematic Apperception Test (Morgan & Murray, 1935) and work by Loy and Turnbull (1964) and Frumkin (1953) are only a very few of many examples.

In a sense of assessment by proxy, the disparity between self-report and report of a proxy concerning the individual making the self-report has been explored significantly in health psychology and geropsychology (e.g., Higginson et al, 1994). It also has been intimated that Gittinger's Personality Assessment System (Winne & Gittinger, 1973)--in an attempt to comply with Wechsler's definition of intelligence--might be employed to construct formal intelligence scores about an individual from narrative data about that individual. It appears, then, that various kinds of assessment by proxy dot personality assessment's history.

The above Issues should be considered by psychologists seeking to advance "personality assessment by proxy" support for psychohistory and by consumers of psychologists' research. As well, psychologists and consumers might consider (1) utilizing other instruments besides the MMPI-2 and even consider a

battery of procedures; (2) employing other data besides the autobiographical--e.g., accounts of interviews with the figure to be assessed, biographies, documentaries, docudramas, interviews with individuals purporting to have had direct or indirect contact with the figure to be assessed; (3) exploring the host of social psychological variables that seem to affect disparities in multiple personality and sociometric ratings of individuals by intimates, peers, colleagues, and acquaintances (Maasen et al, 1998; McCrae et al, 1998); and (4) collaborating with historians who are experts on historical figures. This last might take at least three forms. In one, the psychologist might immerse themselves in conversations with a historian and then complete psychological instruments as if the psychologist were the historical figure. In another, the psychologist might discuss each item of each instrument with the historian germane to how the historical figure might address each item, then the psychologist completing the instruments. In yet another, the historian might complete the instruments as the historical figure.

Ritzler and Singer's demonstration of "MMPI-2 by proxy" to support psychohistory's quest to study psychological factors associated with important events from the past is provocative and heuristic. The demonstration necessitates the ongoing analysis of the most basic assumptions of both psychohistory and personality assessment. The value of this demonstration hopefully will be exemplified through that highest of all accolades--further research. (See Breasted, J.H. (1959). *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. NY: Harper; Confucius. (1992). *Analects*. (T. Cleary, Trans. and Pres.). San Francisco: Harper. Original work published c. 500 B.C.E.; Evans, R.J. (1998). *In defense of history*. Norton; Faust, D. (1997). *Of science, metascience, and clinical practice: The generalization of a generalization to a particular*. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 68, 331-354; Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in an age of reason*. (R. Howard, Trans.). NY: Vintage; Freud, S. (1910). *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood*. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. V. 11. (J. Stachey, Ed.); Frumkin, R.M. (1953). *A use of imaginative reconstruction in the indirect assessment of marital adjustment*. *Sociology and Social Research*, 38, 84-88; Gergen, K. J. (1991). *Emerging challenges for theory and psychology*. *Theory and Psychology*, 1, 13-35; Grove, W.M., & Meehl, P. (1996). *Comparative efficiency of informal (subjective, impressionistic) and formal (mechanical, algorithmic) prediction procedures: The clinical-statistical controversy*. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 2, 293-323; Habermas, J. (1973). 'A postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 3, 157-185; Higginson, I., Priest, P., & McCarthy, M. (1994). *Are bereaved family members a valid proxy for a patient's assessment of dying?* *Social Science and Medicine*, 38, 553-557; Hoess, R. (1959). *Commandant of Auschwitz: The autobiography of Rudolph Hoess*. NY: World; Hoss, R. (1992). *Death Dealer : The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*. Prometheus; Homer. (1951). *The Illiad*. (R. Lattimore, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Original work published c. 850 B.C.E.; Jost, J.T. (1995). *Negative illusions: Conceptual clarification and psychological evidence concerning false consciousness*. *Political Psychology*, 16, 397-424; Kautilya. (1994). *Essentials of Indian statecraft: Kautilya's Arthashastra for contemporary readers*. (T.N. Ramaswamy, Ed.) South Asia Books. Original work published c. 300 B.C.E.; Lasswell, H. (1930). *Psychopathology and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Liu Hsiang. (1996). *Chan-kuo Ts'e*. (J.I. Crump, Trans.). Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies. Original work published c. 20; Loy, D.L., & Turnbull, J.W. (1964). *Indirect assessment of anger dispositions*. *Journal of Projective Techniques and Personality Assessment*, 28, 314-321; Maasen, G.H., Goosens, F.A., & Bokhorst, J. (1998). *Ratings as validation of sociometric status determined by nominations in longitudinal research*. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 26, 259-274; Machiavelli, N. (1940). *The Prince. The Discourses*. NY: The Modern Library. Original work published c. 1513; Masling, J.M. (1997). *On the nature and utility of projective tests and objective tests*. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 69, 257-270; McCrae, R.R., Stone, S.V., Fagan, P.J., & Costa, P.T., Jr. (1998). *Identifying causes of disagreement between self-reports and spouse ratings of*

personality. *Journal of Personality*, 66, 285-313; Morgan, C., & Murray, H. (1935). A method for examining fantasies: The Thematic Apperception Test. *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, 34, 289-306; Ritzler B., & Singer, M. (1998). MMPI-2 by proxy and the Rorschach: A demonstration assessment of the Commandant of Auschwitz. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 71, 212-227; Schwartz, B. (1990). The creation and destruction of value. *American Psychologist*, 45, 7-15; Simonton, D.K. (1997). Creative productivity: A predictive and explanatory model of career trajectories and landmarks. *Psychological Review*, 104, 66-89; Sulloway, F.J. (1995). Birth order and evolutionary psychology: A meta-analytic overview. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6, 75-80; Tetlock, P. E., & Tyler, A. (1996). Churchill's cognitive and rhetorical style: The debates over Nazi intentions and self-government for India. *Political Psychology*, 17, 149-170; Thucydides. (1967). *The Peloponnesian War*. (R. Warner, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books; Winne, J.F., & Gittinger, J.W. (1973). An introduction to the Personality Assessment System. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 1, 99-163.) (Keywords: Proxy, Psychohistory, Psychological Assessment, Typology.)