



## Editorial

# An Easy Alliance: The Relationship Between Phenomenology and Psychobiography

by Carol du Plessis and Graham du Plessis

Guest Editors

Special Edition on Psychobiography and Phenomenology

This Special Edition represents the first attempt, to the best of our knowledge, to explicitly link the traditions of phenomenology and psychobiography. The decision to call for papers for this volume was based on our belief that the phenomenological tradition has much to offer psychobiographical research. Phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience privileges individual voices and subjective experiences and is thus commensurate with the fundamental aim of all psychobiographical research, which is the simultaneously simple yet grandiose task of understanding the life of a single human being. This Special Edition sought to bring together scholarship in psychobiography that made use of the phenomenological tradition as a lens through which to view individual lives and experiences. Each of the four articles collected in this edition represents a different use of phenomenological methods within psychobiographical research and illustrates the way in which the merging of the two traditions allows for densely nuanced description that enhances the psychobiographical narratives. The diversity of the papers contained within this volume reflects the richness of current research in psychobiography, as well as the multiple ways in which phenomenological methods and philosophies can be used within psychobiographical research. In this way, this Special Edition represents (to misquote Elms, 1994) an easy alliance between the respective traditions of phenomenology and psychobiography.

### A Brief Introduction to Psychobiography

Before outlining the articles in this Special Edition, it

is necessary to include a brief introduction to psychobiography for those readers who are unfamiliar with the research method. The term psychobiography refers to the study of the lives of extraordinary or exemplary individuals through the lens of psychological theory, with the aim of arriving at a more in-depth understanding of that particular individual (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2010; Ponterotto, 2014, 2018). Psychobiographical endeavours have a long history, with early attempts at psychobiography by leading figures such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson having mixed success (see Elms, 2005a, as well as Ponterotto and Moncayo's paper in this volume). Psychobiography was nevertheless not very strongly pursued for large parts of the second half of the 20th century. However, over the past four decades the term psychobiography has re-emerged in the psychology lexicon, most notably with the publication of a special edition of the *Journal of Personality* in 1988, the publication of the *Handbook of Psychobiography* (Schultz, 2005) and the more recent publication of a special section on psychobiography by the *American Psychologist* in 2017.

The proliferation of publication in psychobiography has also yielded more rigorous guidelines for conducting psychobiographical research, as well as scholarship in relation to issues such as ethics in psychobiography and ensuring the quality of psychobiographical work (see, for example, du Plessis, 2017; Ponterotto, 2014; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2017; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). While some authors continue to question the validity of the psychobiography endeavour (see, Young

& Collins, 2018, as well as Ponterotto's, 2018, response to this criticism), psychobiography as a method now enjoys a level of legitimacy that suggests that it is increasingly taking its place alongside more mainstream qualitative and case study approaches in psychology. It is hoped that this Special Edition will contribute to this continued growth in the field.

### The Papers in this Edition

The first three articles in this Special Edition present "traditional" psychobiographies that employ different psychological theories as explanatory paradigms. What unifies these case studies is the fact that all three make use of a form of phenomenology as an anchoring framework that allows them to view their subjects through the lens of lived experience and to embrace the subjective reality that resides at the heart of psychobiography. In this way, the inclusion of a phenomenological ontology grounds the studies in lived experience and privileges the subjects' own experiences above the explanations offered by the theoretical frameworks.

Tatiana Latilla and Sherianne Kramer present a psychobiographical study of Red Hot Chili Peppers' frontman, Anthony Kiedis, using Erik Erikson's theory interwoven with lyrics from various albums to put forward an argument suggesting that Kiedis's creative genius is fuelled by an infinite moratorium, allowing him to continue the adolescent pursuit of identity through his lyrical offerings. This psychobiography uses the psychobiographical methodology of writers such as Alexander (1988), Elms (2005b), Schultz (2005) and Ponterotto (2014), but also complements it through the addition of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The use of IPA creates an experiential psychobiography that allows the authors to focus on the lived experience of identity development as experienced by Kiedis. The authors argue that an autobiography can be viewed as a narrative of lived experience, and that IPA can therefore be used to conduct thematic analysis within psychobiography. This blending of two methodological approaches allows for creating a richer psychobiographical interpretation.

Claude-Hélène Mayer and David Maree use the psychobiographical analysis of writer Paulo Coelho to delve into the world of magic and magical thinking. Positioned within the methodological framework of Husserl's phenomenology, the paper focuses on Coelho's *lebenswelt* (lived world) and looks at how magical thinking functions within Coelho's lived experience. The paper traces Coelho's magical thinking across his life and career, and shows how concepts such as magic, clairvoyance, telepathy, spirits and witchcraft function in tandem with his success as a writer. At one point, the paper argues that Coelho inhabits two distinct lived worlds, a superficial world of celebrity and a depth world of magic, and that these two *lebenswelten* both play a crucial role in Coelho's success as a writer. The

paper is groundbreaking in that it positions magical thinking as non-pathological, and shows how this form of thinking has had a positive influence on the life of an extremely successful individual. This non-pathologising view of magical thinking has practical and therapeutic implications, as it may allow therapists working with patients to view unusual thinking patterns as part of a positive and self-actualising process of behaviour. The role played by Husserl's phenomenology in this psychobiography is central, as it is the willingness on the part of the authors to examine lived experience (rather than apply a pre-existing theoretical lens) that enables this positive reading of Coelho's magical thinking. The phenomenological approach allowed for the understanding that the two *lebenswelten* are complementary rather than antagonistic.

Paul Fouché, Nico Nortjé, Crystal Welman and Roelf van Niekerk provide a sophisticated analysis of the only female subject in this Special Edition, the anti-war campaigner Emily Hobhouse. With her trail-blazing campaigning against the abuse of the Afrikaner population during the Anglo-Boer war, Hobhouse is portrayed in this psychobiographical study as an individual who in her later years was able to break free from the orthodox female roles in which she was raised and make a contribution to society in her own right. Given the importance of interpreting Hobhouse's activities within the psychosocial context in which they occurred, the study does well to ground itself in the ontological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968), basing its analysis on the phenomenological view of "the individual in the world and the world in the individual". Through its commitment to viewing Hobhouse's life as deeply embedded in context, the analysis is able to demonstrate how the occurrence of importance events in Hobhouse's external world (such as the death of her father, or the Anglo-Boer War) during times of psychological transition in her internal world (based on the theory of Levinson, 1996; Levinson et al., 1978) combined to change her life trajectory and resulted in her engaging in activities that would not have been expected of a woman of her era and status.

The final article in this Special Edition is not a psychobiography in the traditional sense, but instead an analysis of the relationship between the psychobiographer and his or her subject. Joseph Ponterotto and Kevin Moncayo argue that this relationship is unique in the research field and resembles, in many ways, the relationship between a psychotherapist and a patient. The study makes use of the case study of Sigmund Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci to show how countertransference plays a role in the psychobiographical process. This thought-provoking paper represents a novel view of the psychobiographical relationship between the researcher and his/her subject and highlights the importance of an objectively balanced emotional relationship as pivotal to the production of a quality psychobiography.

In conclusion, the four papers in this volume represent a move forward for psychobiography, and we believe that they demonstrate the way in which phenomenology

and psychobiography can function in “easy alliance”. We hope that the readers of this Special Edition enjoy reading the articles as much as we have.

### Referencing Format

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