



A Cautious Alliance: The Psychobiographer's Relationship with Her/His Subject

by Joseph G. Ponterotto and Kevin Moncayo

Abstract

Psychobiography has been a topical area and an applied research specialty in psychology since Freud's (1910/1989) influential psychoanalytic psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci. Throughout the last century, psychobiographers have emphasized the importance of anchoring interpretations of life histories in established psychological theories and rigorous historiographic research methods. One topical area receiving less attention in psychobiography is the critical relationship between the psychobiographer and her or his subject as it relates to the process of psychobiographical writing. The present article explores the phenomenology and challenges of this relationship in order to ultimately propose practical strategies for navigating countertransference issues throughout the subject selection, research and publication phases of psychobiography. Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci is used as a model of the stages of psychobiography, the evolution of the psychobiographer-subject relationship, and the challenges of countertransference.

... a second edition of the Leonardo, the only truly beautiful thing I have ever written, is in preparation.

(Sigmund Freud, 1919/1972, p. 90)

The quotation above is taken from a letter written by Sigmund Freud to his friend and fellow psychoanalyst, Lou Andreas-Salome, on February 9, 1919, some nine years after the publication of the inaugural edition of *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (Freud, 1910/1989). In the letter excerpt, Freud mused that his psychoanalytic profile of the Italian Renaissance artist and inventor was the "only truly beautiful" work he had produced. This comment is quite surprising given the volume of ground-breaking works that Freud had produced by 1919, including *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and *On the Sexual Theories of Children*, among other significant works (see review in Gay, 1989). Such a reflection reveals Freud's ongoing connection to Leonardo, and also how

meaningful his work on the da Vinci project was to him personally, as well as to his career (Strachey, 1989).

As did Freud (1910/1989) in his analysis of Leonardo, psychobiographers often spend many months, if not years, studying a single historic personality and learning the various intricacies of his or her life. During this time, they often develop a deep and personal connection to their research subjects. As such, Freud's decade-long attachment to Leonardo is not unique in the field of psychobiography. Traditional literature in the field of psychobiography has emphasized three areas: selecting a subject of historical significance so as to appeal to a broad interdisciplinary audience; anchoring the interpretation of life experiences and behaviours in established theories of psychology; and using both proven and innovative historiographic and psychological research methods to ensure the rigour of the investigative process and final published product (Kasser, 2017; Ponterotto, 2014a; Schultz, 2005; 2014; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). In the last decade, the importance of best ethical practice

throughout the research process has been highlighted as well, adding a fourth emphasis in the field of psychobiography (Ponterotto, 2013; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2017). Yet, a core component of the psychobiography research process that has not received sufficient attention in the literature is the relationship established between the psychobiographer and her or his research subject. Understanding this relationship and how the researcher navigates this experience may be fundamental to constructing a model for how psychobiographers can tackle the methodological and countertransference issues throughout the psychobiography process.

The present article explores the psychobiographer-subject relationship and how it evolves throughout the planning, research, writing, publishing and marketing process. Using Freud’s (1910/1989) landmark psychoanalytic psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci as a model for the development of a psychobiography, the authors trace Freud’s interest in and attitude toward Leonardo from roughly 1898 to 1919, relying primarily on his personal correspondence. According to the classification of document sources in psychobiography, personal letters would constitute first person documents

(Allport, 1942).

Altogether, this focus may serve to better illustrate the intricacies of a typical psychobiographer-subject relationship, which can not only call attention to typical pitfalls, but also provide general guidance for future writing. Our discussion is thus organized along four major sections. First, the psychobiographer-to-subject relationship is characterized as unique relative to more established and popular research approaches. Then, three different stages of the psychobiography research and writing process are outlined: selecting one’s psychobiographical subject; the research and writing process; and publishing the psychobiography and reflecting on the work after publication. In addition, each of the three phases is followed by suggestions and guidelines for psychobiographers in navigating the relationship to the historical subject, monitoring possible countertransference issues, and maintaining objectivity throughout the process. Using this approach (depicted graphically in Figure 1 below), one can address thoughts and feelings at critical points in the research process, which can subsequently work to confront concerns and issues that arise during these periods.

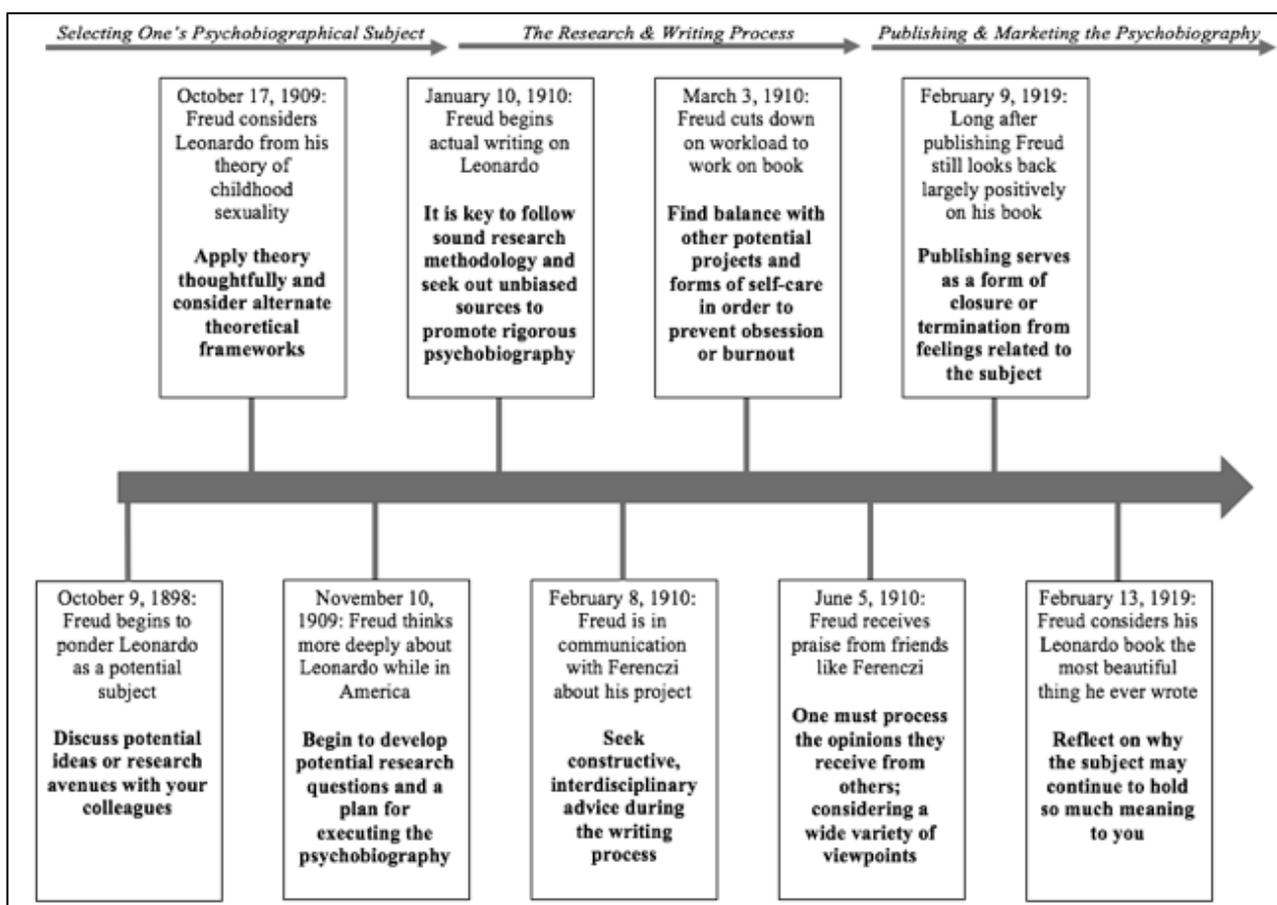


Figure 1: Navigating the Relationship between Psychobiographer and Research Subject

Psychobiographer ↔ Subject: A Unique Relationship in Research

In psychobiography, the evolving relationship between researchers and their subjects is rather unique relative to most forms of quantitative and qualitative research in psychology. Unlike the more conventional quantitative approaches to research that rely on large, anonymous, and preferably random samples of subjects, psychobiography involves a singular subject that is named; purposely not anonymous. Popular qualitative research approaches often involve in-depth interviews with small samples of subjects with the goal of describing their collective phenomenology and *erlebnis* (lived experience), with the subjects remaining anonymous in the final report. Even single case design and $N = 1$ research, which often utilizes quantitative methods, maintains the anonymity of the subject in the written report, as do clinical case studies of individual patients. Another important distinction between psychobiographical and other types of psychological research is that psychobiographical subjects are often deceased, sometimes long-deceased. In fact, a recent content analysis of 65 psychobiographies found that 97% of the historic subjects studied were deceased (Ponterotto, Reynolds, Morel, & Cheung, 2015).

As noted by Ponterotto (2014b), some parallels between psychobiographical research and individual psychotherapy can be recognised. Both the psychobiographer and the psychotherapist work for long periods of time (sometimes years) to understand their subject or patient in a socio-cultural-historical context. Both strive to understand the inner psychology, drives and motivations of the individual: the therapist for the benefit of the patient's insight, health, and quality of life, and the psychobiographer for the benefit of advancing historical and psychological knowledge, and informing the public. However, a psychobiographer usually works with one subject at a time, whereas the psychotherapist may be working with 20 or more patients concurrently.

A construct critical to the psychotherapist-patient relationship, particularly in more psychodynamic approaches, is countertransference, defined as the redirection of a psychotherapist's unconscious feelings and attitudes toward a client; or, more generally, as a therapist's emotional entanglement with a client (Arlow, 2005). Experienced psychobiographers emphasize that countertransference is also a salient construct relative to psychobiographers' unconscious feelings toward their subjects (Anderson, 1981a, 1981b; Ponterotto, 2014a). In psychotherapy training programmes and clinical supervision, the therapist is cautioned to be aware of possible countertransference issues that may emerge in the course of the therapeutic relationship. Being unaware of countertransference issues can impact the therapist's objectivity and limit (or even damage) the therapy

process.

We maintain that issues of countertransference should be incorporated into the training of psychobiographers. Although the majority of psychobiographers conduct research on deceased historic personalities, they are nonetheless subject to feelings of countertransference given the length and intensity of their study of the subject. Like countertransference in psychotherapy relationships, countertransference in the researcher-subject relationship can interfere with developing an accurate understanding of the subject. Later in this article, the authors review likely countertransference issues that may have attenuated the balance and methodological rigour of Freud's (1910/1989) profile of Leonardo.

Evolution of a Psychobiography: From Intrigue to Obsession to Writing to Termination

There is something a little mesmerizing about locating mysteries in people's lives, then fleshing these mysteries out and, finally, shedding what intensity of light one can on them. (Schultz, 2011, p. viii)

In this section, the authors review the evolution of a psychobiography from an initial peaked interest in the historic subject, to deep curiosity about the subject and unsolved questions about her or his life, to an almost obsession to understand and then share uncovered insights with others, to the actual writing of the psychobiography, and, finally, to reflecting on the historic figure long after the psychobiography is completed and, hopefully, published. Using Freud's (1910/1989) study of Leonardo da Vinci as a stimulus, we review the following three stages of the psychobiography research and writing process with particular attention to the relationship between psychobiographer and research subject: selecting one's psychobiographical subject, the research and writing process, and publishing and marketing the psychobiography.

Modern psychobiographers are called to follow best methodological and ethical practices as they engage in psychobiographical writing (Kasser, 2017; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). Thus, along with an explanation of each stage, we provide practical suggestions to the psychobiographer for navigating her or his relationship to the psychobiographical subject throughout the research process. Like the historian and scientist, the psychologist in the role of psychobiographer must maintain some sense of objectivity and balance in profiling the inner psychological life of the research subject (Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2017). These suggestions are culled from the experiences of the present authors as well as other experienced psychobiographers (e.g., Anderson, 1981a, 1981b; Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1982; Schultz, 2005). To help guide the reader, Figure 1 summarizes many of

these suggestions situated along a timeline representing the Leonardo project (see Figure 1 above).

Selecting one's Psychobiographical Subject: Beginning the Relationship

Psychobiographers have commented that they did not choose their research subject, but instead the subject chose them – as if reaching out and taking hold of the researcher and exclaiming: understand my life the way no one heretofore has, and share it with the world (see discussion in Elms, 1994; Ponterotto, 2012; Schultz, 2011). Psychobiographers often feel called to understand their subjects, solve the mysteries and complexities of their personality development, and then educate the public about this historic or famous individual (Schultz, 2005). Yet, admiration for and/or curiosity about the historic subject is most likely established long before the psychobiographer commits to formally writing the psychobiography. For example, Erik Erikson first developed a strong interest in Mahatma Gandhi in 1962 during a visit to Ahmedabad, India, the initial site of Gandhi's hunger strike and labour movement. And yet, Erikson (1969) would not publish his classic and Pulitzer Prize winning psychobiography, *Gandhi's Truth*, until seven years later. Alan Elms (1994; Elms & Heller, 2005) discussed his decades-long fascination with the emotional components of Elvis Presley's songs before beginning the formal study of his life and music. Similarly, William Todd Schultz (2011) had long been intrigued by the writing and life of Truman Capote before eventually penning his psychobiography of the novelist.

Often, the psychobiographer is intrigued by her or his subject and may, consciously or unconsciously, in some ways identify with the historic figure (Elms, 1994). Sigmund Freud had been mulling over Leonardo da Vinci's life – his childhood, his romantic and sexual life, and his artistic and scientific productions – for at least a decade before he penned his first words on Leonardo in early January 1910. In September of 1898, during a visit to Milan, Italy, Freud visited Leonardo's *Last Supper* as well as his frescoed ceiling and upper walls in the *Sala delle Asse* (Simmons, 2006). Shortly thereafter, on October 9, 1898, in a letter written to his colleague Wilhelm Fliess, he stated: "Leonardo – no love affair of his is known – is perhaps the most famous left-handed person. Can you use him?" (Freud, 1898/1985, p. 331). One can sense that Freud is pondering Leonardo; a unique figure, left-handed, and never in love with another adult person? Clearly, Freud was intrigued with Leonardo and the mysteries of his life, and began learning more about him through reading biographies of the Italian Renaissance artist and inventor (Strachey, 1989). Furthermore, it appears that in a reply to a survey question sent to him in 1907 by the Vienna "Antiquary Hinterberger", which asked Freud to list "ten good books", Freud included Merezhkovski's

(1904) biographical novel of Leonardo da Vinci in his selection (E. Freud, 1992, pp. 268-269).

Precisely when Freud committed to penning a psychoanalytic biography of Leonardo da Vinci is unknown. Certainly, however, during and soon after his trip to the United States (accompanied by Jung) to present a series of informal lectures at the 20th anniversary of the founding of Clark University in September, 1909, Freud decided to apply his psychoanalytic methods to the life of Leonardo. In a letter Freud wrote to Jung on October 17, 1909, he portends that a psychoanalytic psychobiography is forthcoming:

We must also take hold of biography. I have had an inspiration since my return. The riddle of Leonardo da Vinci's character has suddenly become clear to me. That would be a first step in the realm of biography. But the material concerning L. is so sparse that I despair of demonstrating my conviction intelligibly to others. I have ordered an Italian work on his youth and am now waiting eagerly for it. (Freud, 1909/1974a, p. 255)

In the same letter to Jung of October 17, 1909, Freud urges him to reread his short papers on the *Sexual Theories of Children*, which formed the basis for his developing interpretations of Leonardo. It also appears that a patient of Freud stimulated an association to Leonardo.

In the meantime I will reveal the secret [of Leonardo da Vinci's personality structure] to you. Do you remember my remarks in the "Sexual Theories of Children" (2nd Short Papers) to the effect that children's first primitive researches in this sphere were bound to fail and that this first failure could have a paralyzing effect on them? Read the passages over; at the time I did not take it as seriously as I do now. Well, the great Leonardo was such a man; at an early age he converted his sexuality into an urge for knowledge and from then on the inability to finish anything he undertook became a pattern to which he had to conform in all his ventures: he was sexually inactive or homosexual. Not so long ago I came across his image and likeness (without his genius) in a neurotic. (Freud, 1909/1974a, p. 255)

In this letter to Jung it is clear that Freud believed he had solved the riddle of Leonardo's creative energy (sublimated sexuality) through the lens of his own theory. This "light bulb moment" for psychobiographers, when they feel they truly understand an aspect of their subject's life, is akin to finding a secret treasure map. One needs now only to follow the map to its conclusion. Then, during November of 1909, Freud's mind was very

occupied with questions regarding the psychogenesis of Leonardo da Vinci, as evidenced in the following series of letter excerpts. On November 10, 1909, with the North America trip still fresh in his mind, Freud wrote to his friend and fellow psychoanalyst, Sandor Ferenczi (who had also made the trip to the USA, he travelling from Hungary), stating that:

I am scientifically fixated by the American lectures, the last of which has already sailed off [for publication]. Otherwise I have been lucky with two trivialities, with the antithetical meaning of primal words and with an analysis of – just marvel at the illustrious subject – Leonardo da Vinci. (Brabant, Falzender, & Giampieri-Deutsch, 1993, p. 98)

The next day, November 11, 1909, writing to C. G. Jung, Freud stated:

Since then, a noble spirit, Leonardo da Vinci, has been posing for me – I have been doing a little ΨA of him. Whether it will turn out to be a brief note or a number of papers, I don't know yet. In any event I am setting it aside for the moment. (Freud, 1909/1974b, pp. 260-261)

Freud is excited by his Leonardo project and wants to share his enthusiasm with his trusted colleagues and friends. In another letter to Jung written on November 21, 1909, Freud's depth of enthusiasm for his evolving Leonardo analysis is clear:

I do wish I could show you my analysis of Leonardo da Vinci. I am desperately sorry not to have you here. It would be too long in a letter and I haven't the time. I am coming to attach more and more importance to the infantile theories of sexuality. (Freud, 1909/1974c, p. 266)

And, on the same day, Freud writes to Ferenczi, indicating:

I could also do better healthwise, America has cost me much. My thoughts, insofar as I can still make them perceptible, are with Leonardo da Vinci and Mythology (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 108).

In this section on selecting one's psychobiographical subject, we see that Freud was intrigued by Leonardo da Vinci and curious about various unanswered questions about his life. These included why Leonardo had never developed a love relationship in adulthood, why he moved from art and painting to engineering and science, and why he left so many initiated projects incomplete (see, e.g., Strachey, 1989). It is also evident

that, in using Leonardo as a case study, he is further conceptualizing his theory of childhood sexuality and the route to a possible homosexual or asexual orientation to life. A reading of Freud's personal letters at this point indicate a commitment to publishing his ideas and theory on Leonardo. Sometimes moving from ideas and hypotheses about one's subject to the actual writing is a difficult process, and one that includes periods of slow progress followed by writing breakthroughs. The unfolding of such a process is evident in Freud's subsequent profiling of Leonardo.

Considerations and recommendations in selecting one's psychobiographical subject

Taking into account Freud's thoughts during this stage, the authors caution that psychobiographers should have a stance of controlled empathy for their subjects, neither idolizing them nor demonizing them, lest the resultant psychobiography be riddled with bias. Ideally, according to Elms (1994, p. 21), the psychobiographer should choose a "subject about whom you feel considerable ambivalence." A majority of psychobiographers are drawn to historic figures they have greatly admired on some level – although, of course, some researchers purposely focus on profiles of evil, hate, and aggression, as in Langer's (1972) study of Hitler, to advance the study of abnormal and forensic psychology.

In selecting the historic subject and committing to the psychobiographical endeavour, the researcher should preferably maintain a stance of objectivity and openness to learning about the subject, even if it is someone they have had previous interest in learning about. Objectivity and scholarship of a psychobiography can be placed on a continuum, from degradeography and simple pathography on the negative end, to idolography and hagiography on the positive end. In the middle of the continuum is appropriate psychobiography, which is characterized by a controlled empathy for the subject, and an openness to uncover, interpret, and report whatever information emerges that sheds light on the famous personality, even if it disappoints the researcher (Ponterotto, 2014a). Perhaps Freud was somewhat too positively disposed towards Leonardo and so lost some of his objective stance (see Elms, 1994, 2005).

In selecting their research subjects, psychobiographers should reflect on and process why the particular public figure was chosen. Among the questions to consider are: Do I have some ambivalence regarding this individual, and can I maintain a stance of controlled empathy throughout the research process? Do I have positive or negative biases toward the subject that I need to bracket out and be aware of as I begin the research? Am I prepared to conduct this psychobiography in terms of having a wide breadth and depth of knowledge on the individual through my readings? How much do I need to learn about the historical period and socio-cultural context in which the subject lived? What are the

mysteries or unanswered questions in the subject's life that I hope to unravel in the research? What potential psychological theories would you favour in analyzing this particular individual? Altogether, it may be especially useful to discuss these questions with colleagues who may be able to help you explore your connection, and thought process, regarding the potential subject from an outside perspective.

The Research and Writing Process: Committing to and Building the Relationship

As of January 1, 1910, Freud had not yet begun actually writing about Leonardo. In a letter to Ferenczi dated that day, Freud laments, "Otherwise I am lazy, gnawing at Leonardo, about whom not a line has been written" (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 119). However, by January 10, letters indicate that Freud had started putting some of his thoughts and research on Leonardo down on paper, as noted in Freud's letter to Ferenczi dated that same day:

Very occasionally I sometimes write a few lines about Leonardo, which is still proceeding with great difficulty. At home things are very well, in my practice lively. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 124)

Freud's relationship, discussions and correspondence with friend and colleague Sandor Ferenczi motivated him in terms of finishing the Leonardo work. In a letter to Ferenczi dated February 8, 1910, Freud stated:

Our talk has also invigorated me greatly. Every day after work I write on Leonardo and am already on page 10. My writer's cramp is in full convalescence. As a consequence of your impressive exhortation to allow myself some rest, I have taken on a new patient from Odessa, a very rich Russian with compulsive feelings, but I am more capable of accomplishment than ever. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 133)

It is astonishing to consider how hard Freud was working during this time. He carried a full patient load, was organizing meetings and conferences, writing and publishing on various topics, and now fully engaged in the Leonardo psychoanalysis (Elms, 1994). Freud was now committed to finishing the Leonardo project, and in a letter to Ferenczi on March 3, 1910, he noted cutting down his overall workload to devote more time to the Leonardo writing:

In consequence of an attack of writing frenzy which has advanced Leonardo to page thirty, I have postponed thanking you for the interesting mailings. I am now freer, work and earn less, and would like to be finished with Leonardo by the time of the Congress [which

took place in March, 1910]. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 147)

March 1910 continued to be a productive writing period for Freud in respect of his work on Leonardo. In a letter of March 10 to Ferenczi he stated, "I (I want to lift the incognito) am writing every free hour, i.e., every third day, on Leonardo and have brought it up to p. 40" (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 150). Then, in another letter to Ferenczi (who was soon to visit and travel with Freud) dated March 17, 1910, Freud sees his project nearing completion, stating:

I will be finished with Leonardo before Easter, will therefore await you at our house on Sunday evening, and on Monday evening at 8:30 we will travel through the night to Nuremberg. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 152)

In 1910, Easter Sunday fell on March 27. Thus, Freud wrote the entire Leonardo psychobiography in less than three months, beginning on January 10 and ending around March 27, 1910. Freud liked closure on projects, since this would allow him to feel accomplished and then move on to other projects. However, in his rush to publish Leonardo, and with the limited biographical data he had available in German, Freud's final report on the great artist contained numerous methodological flaws, as will be summarized later in this article (Elms, 1994; Gay, 1989; Strachey, 1989).

Considerations and recommendations in the research and writing process

Psychobiography is most often a long-term research process, and psychobiographers must consider whether they will have the time and commitment necessary to see the project through to completion. Throughout the research process the psychobiographer accesses and integrates an extensive amount of information about the subject. Hopefully, the researcher is triangulating multiple sources of data, namely first person sources such as letters, diaries, recorded conversations or interviews, autobiographies, and artistic creations; second person sources such as recorded memories of friends and close associates of the historic subject; and more distanced third person sources such as biographies, newspapers, periodicals, government or institutional documents, police reports, and so forth.

In collating and integrating the wide breadth of the information that may become available, the psychobiographer should take care to look for not only evidence confirming her or his hunches or hypotheses, but also disconfirming evidence (Ponterotto, 2014a). And, in respect of particular events or behaviours in the subject's life, the researcher should examine alternative explanations and perspectives (Runyan, 1981). Important to monitoring bias at this stage, the psychobiographer can expose her or his developing explanations to an interdisciplinary set of colleagues, inclusive of other

psychologists, historians who had studied the subject, and sociologists or political scientists familiar with the historical period of the subject's life. In the United States, two helpful, small-group peer supervision venues are the San Francisco Bay Area Psychobiography group on the west coast (see Elms, 1994), and the Association for Psychohistory discussion groups on the east coast (see <http://www.psychohistory.us>).

It is our view that Freud could have done a better job of seeking peer-supervision and constructive critique on his developing ideas about Leonardo da Vinci. Instead, he discussed his Leonardo project mainly with like-minded analysts who – at least as can be determined in the personal correspondence – praised his work rather than challenged aspects of it. He did eventually present his ideas on da Vinci to a group of analysts in Vienna, but it is not clear how open he was to criticism or suggestions on the work. For example, on December 1, 1910, Freud had talked about “A Fantasy of Leonardo da Vinci” at the weekly Wednesday meeting of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society after returning from his visit to Ferenczi in Budapest. In a letter to Ferenczi dated two days later on December 3, he wrote:

The lecture on Leonardo on the evening of the day which we began together was not very satisfactory to me. Stein was there. I didn't get to hear any good response: even unusually uninspired and off-the-mark stuff from Adler. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 110)

Was Adler's comment on the Leonardo project really uninspiring and off-the-mark? Or did he just proffer interpretations or comments that Freud was not open to hearing? Although Freud was opening his work up for peer supervision, was he absorbing it? It would be very enlightening if Adler's specific comments and reactions to Freud's talk that Wednesday night were known; unfortunately, they are not.

As psychobiographers engage with the research and writing on their subjects, they should be attuned to their own intellectual and emotional reactions to their developing understanding of the subject. What information has been consistent with previous hunches about the subject, and what information has challenged early hypotheses? What feelings are emerging or changing about the subject as the research progresses? Is the psychobiographer flexible and objective enough to reconsider or shift positions or understanding of the individual? Here it is good to process current thoughts and feelings about the subject and the work with diverse colleagues.

Furthermore, it is not at all uncommon for psychobiographers to dream about their historic subject (see e.g., Elms, 1994). These dreams can be processed with

colleagues, or the psychobiographer can seek her or his own therapy which might inform unconscious and conscious connections to the research subject. Even when in the thick of research on their historic subjects, it is suggested that psychobiographers maintain balance in their personal and work life, as it is easy to become somewhat obsessed with work on the project. This could also be discussed with colleagues, if not a therapist, or may simply be a sign that the psychobiographer needs to find balance with other potential projects and forms of self-care. The question is not only how much time can be dedicated to researching and writing about a subject, but how much time we should. If not properly managed, such feelings could adversely impact the work, whether leading to burnout, bias, or a general clouding of judgment.

One possible strategy during the process, although not necessary, would be to consider writing a shorter piece, or concise and thorough outline, on the subject first. This would allow the researcher to flesh out potential ideas and theoretical psychological connections, and also to gauge possible bias or how one generally feels about working with this particular subject. Close colleagues can also be instrumental in this process, providing one with new possible avenues of research, affirmation of current routes of thinking, and constructive critiques of one's work on all levels. In other words, this would provide a foundation for a potentially larger work, already accounting for some of the common issues that may come up during that process.

Publishing and Marketing the Psychobiography: Terminating the Relationship?

The reception of *Leonardo and a Memory of his Childhood* by the broader professional community was mixed, as was the case with much of what Freud published at that time (Gay, 1989). His close adherents, fellow psychoanalysts and friends, were very receptive to Freud's study of Leonardo and the inherent theories of early childhood sexuality, origins of homosexuality, and so forth. For example, Sandor Ferenczi wrote to Freud on June 5, 1910 after Freud sent him a copy of the book: “Many thanks for *Leonardo*. I have already heard everything essential about it from you personally, and yet it is only now that I have gotten the complete impression of your idea” (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 178). In another letter to Freud from Ferenczi dated June 12, 1920, he wrote:

Your Leonardo makes a deep impression even on those who already essentially knew its content – there are so many ideas distributed among the few pages that they give one something to think about for weeks. – This first psychoanalytic pathography (Sadger's Lenu is too oversimplified) will serve as a

model for all time. (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 181)

Although in some ways the publication of his book on Leonardo marked closure, or project completion, Freud would not forget this work and would continue to ponder about the life of da Vinci for decades to come. After all, how do psychobiographers process termination issues with a subject they have intensely studied but who is long dead? Whereas clinicians have been taught to begin discussing termination issues with clients many weeks before the final session, psychobiographers have been left to their own devices in navigating this process. Interestingly, some nine years after Leonardo was first published in 1910, Freud, while writing to his colleague and friend Lou Andreas-Salome (on February 9, 1919) about other projects, mentions something revelatory about his relationship to the Leonardo work:

I did not send you the large volume of the Introductory Lectures, because it is an unaltered impression of the edition in three parts which you already possess. But a word from you that you would also like to have this one-volume edition and it shall be dispatched at once. Van Renterghem's Dutch translation of the first half has recently arrived; a second edition of the Leonardo, *the only truly beautiful thing I have ever written*, is in preparation [italics added]. (Freud, 1919/1972, p. 90)

Four days later, on February 13, in a letter to Ferenczi, Freud shares a similar sentiment:

Leonardo, certainly *the only pretty thing* I have ever written, has already been corrected and handed over for the second edition. After nine years [italics added]. (Falzeder & Brabant, 1996, p. 332)

In some ways, Freud was more attached to, or connected more closely with, the Leonardo project than his other significant and innovative works. Why was Leonardo so present in Freud's consciousness? Freud historians (Jones, 1953-1957) and psychobiographers (Elms, 2005) make a strong case that Freud identified with Leonardo da Vinci and projected his own feelings and intrapsychic conflicts onto Leonardo; which suggests what is called countertransference.

Considerations and recommendations in publishing and marketing the psychobiography

As noted above, the psychobiographer eventually reaches some degree of closure with regard to understanding the historic subject, unravelling unsolved mysteries in the subject's life, and reporting the research in an article or book format. Once the psychobiography is published, the researcher awaits reactions from scholars, other professionals and a lay public. Admiring or critical reviews of the work may appear, and the researcher

will need to absorb the feedback and to be open to constructive criticism of the published work. As in Freud's case with Leonardo da Vinci, the psychobiographer usually maintains an attachment to, and strong interest in, her or his subject long after the study is published. The researcher can absorb the constructive criticism from scholars and lay readers and begin to chart ideas for a second, updated edition to the work.

Very often, after the initial psychobiography has been published, people knowledgeable with regard to the historic subject may offer new information and insights. For example, after one of this article's co-authors published initial psychobiographies on chess champion Bobby Fischer (Ponterotto, 2012) and George Magazine co-founder and editor, John F. Kennedy, Jr. (Ponterotto, 2017), numerous individuals, who had not initially been interviewed, reached out and were open to talking with the researcher. Furthermore, particularly in this age of internet resources, new information often becomes available on past public figures. Old letters or artistic works are uncovered, secret or classified reports (e.g., FBI documents) become available, or acquaintances of the historic subject finally reveal information on the subject. These expanded sources bode well for the psychobiographer writing an expanded and improved second edition. On the other hand, writing a psychobiography can take a physical and emotional toll on the researcher, and she or he needs to decide if it is better to continue research on the subject or perhaps to move on to other topics and activities. But, even if one does decide to move on, the subject may still continue to hold some form of meaning for the psychobiographer.

Limitations of Freud's (1910) Leonardo da Vinci

Elms (1994, 2005), a leading Freud psychobiographer, reviewed a number of limitations in Freud's study of Leonardo da Vinci. Some of these are methodological, caused in part by the lack of extensive biographical information on Leonardo available in German in 1909-1910, as well as by Freud's rush to complete and publish his study. Other limitations were the result of Freud's possible countertransference issues, thus limiting his objectivity in profiling Leonardo da Vinci.

It is important to keep in mind that in 1909 there were few biographies on Leonardo da Vinci in the German language. Freud could not read Italian well (see Elms, 1994) and thus relied to a large degree on translated documents in his study of da Vinci's early background. One major flaw in Freud's analysis of Leonardo is that, in retelling an early childhood dream reported by da Vinci in which he remembered a bird of some type repeatedly thrusting its tail into his mouth, Freud relied on an erroneous German translation of the word "nibbio", a European bird of prey (a "kite" in English), and instead interpreted it as "vulture", an Egyptian bird of prey. This mis-translation would prove to be a marked

flaw in Freud's subsequent analysis of Leonardo, given the symbolism of "vulture" in psychoanalytic thought. Other limitations in the Leonardo analysis, according to Elms (1994, 2005), resulted from Freud not having adequate knowledge of art history, Italian cultural life in the 15th and 16th centuries, Roman Catholic religious history and tradition, paint chemistry, and European Renaissance politics. Naturally, contemporary psychobiographers equipped with internet resources and an array of translation tools have access to significantly more accurate biographical and historical data than a century ago. Yet, it remains the psychobiographer's responsibility to seek the most accurate sources about their subjects and about the time period and culture in which they lived.

Elms (1994, 2005) also identified a number of counter-transference issues that are likely to have limited Freud's objectivity in the work. Firstly, Freud identified with Leonardo and endowed the artist/inventor with some of his own characteristics. Freud referred to Leonardo as a "universal genius"; was Freud also projecting his sense of self onto Leonardo (see Elms, 1994)? Freud highlighted that Leonardo had become isolated from his contemporaries because of his rejection of religious and traditional authority in favour of empirical observation. He also believed that Leonardo's colleagues in art and science did not understand or credit Leonardo for his genius. Of course, Freud scholars note that many of these isolating and minimizing perceptions ascribed to Leonardo also applied to Freud's feelings about his own contemporaries at the turn of the 20th century. Elms (1994, 2005) furthermore discussed how Freud's description of Leonardo's relationship with his mother and the oedipal conflict closely aligned with Freud's early life history. Freud also described an early childhood dream in which Egyptian bird-headed figures carry his mother into his room and lay her on the bed. Of course, the Egyptian vulture interpretation ascribed to Leonardo's early childhood dream includes striking similarities to Freud's early dream.

Freud's Contributions to Psychobiography

Even though Freud's profile of Leonardo was marked by significant methodological limitations and counter-transference issues, the work nonetheless constitutes a landmark contribution to the field of psychobiography. By deconstructing what went right and what went wrong in Freud's profile of the Renaissance genius, subsequent psychobiographers have markedly both advanced and strengthened the field of psychobiography (e.g., Elms, 1994; Erikson, 1968; Kőváry, 2011; Runyan, 1982;

Schultz, 2005). Freud's psychoanalytic study of Leonardo was considered significantly stronger and more balanced than previous attempts at psychoanalytic profiling of historic figures, and particularly the more pathographic profiles written by psychoanalyst Isador Sadger on poets Konrad Ferdinand Meyer and Nicholaus Lenaus (see Elms, 1994, 2005). Among the insights and advances emerging from Freud's Leonardo study were (see Elms, 1994, 2005):

- Psychobiographers should maintain a balanced stance towards their subjects, neither idolizing nor hating them.
- Freud believed that one should identify the intrapsychic (and therefore pathographic) conflicts played out in the subject's adult behaviour, but one should also provide historical and cultural context and a fuller holistic profile.
- Application of the psychological theory interpreting and explaining the life of the individual must be comprehensive and in-depth.
- Consistent with the psychoanalytic view, childhood experiences of individuals and their early relationships with care-givers have a significant impact on the course of the developmental life cycle, and life work of the subject.
- The psychobiographer should engage with peer supervisors to process her or his thinking about, and relationship with, the subject as she or he plans, conducts, and writes up the study. From Freud's trove of personal letters to colleagues, it is evident that he talked about the Leonardo project, particularly in the two-year period 1909-1910, although it is not clear how much objective feedback and peer supervision he actually received or accepted.

It is fitting to close this article with a quotation from Russell Jacoby (2009) on the enduring contribution of Sigmund Freud. Jacoby was profiling Freud on the 100th anniversary of his visit to the United States in 1909, a trip during which when he was pondering the mind of Leonardo da Vinci:

He dug to uncover the forces that make us not only loving, but also odd, hateful, and violent. Even when he was wrong, a boldness infused his thinking. He remains a tonic for a cautious age. (Jacoby, 2009, p. 1)

Referencing Format

Ponterotto, J. G., & Moncayo, K. (2018). A cautious alliance: The psychobiographer's relationship with his/her subject. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 18 (Special Edition: Psychobiography), 12 pp. doi: 10.1080/20797222.2017

About the Authors

Joseph G. Ponterotto
Professor of Counselling Psychology
Graduate School of Education
Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus
New York City, USA
E-mail address: ponterotto@fordham.edu



Joseph G. Ponterotto, PhD., is a Professor of Counselling Psychology in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus, New York City. His research areas include multicultural counselling and psychology, psychobiography, qualitative research methods, and career development. He is the author of *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline of a World Chess Champion* (2012), and has just completed *A Psychobiography of John F. Kennedy, Jr.: Understanding His Inner Life, Achievements, Struggles, and Courage* for publication in 2019. Dr. Ponterotto is both a licensed psychologist and a mental health counsellor in New York State, and maintains a small private practice in New York City.



Kevin Moncayo
Graduate Student
Fordham University, Mental Health Counselling program
New York City, USA
E-mail address: kmoncayo@fordham.edu

Kevin Moncayo is a Master's-level graduate student in Fordham University's Mental Health Counselling programme. Initially beginning his undergraduate experience as a history major at the College of New Jersey, Kevin added psychology during his sophomore year. This provided him with the opportunity to research the perceptions of romantic relationships in college, investigate the benefits of play for underprivileged children, and intern at the on-campus community-based clinic. Currently, Kevin is about halfway through his Master's course work and set to begin his clinical internship at Fordham University's Career Services. Additionally, with regard to research, he is currently collaborating with Dr Joseph Ponterotto in studying the integration of history and psychology, while also researching skills children can learn from video games with Dr Fran Blumberg, and the Chinese-American experience with doctoral candidate Christina Clemons.

References

- Allport, G. W. (1942). *The use of personal documents in psychological science*. New York, NY: Social Science Research Council.
- Anderson, J. W. (1981a). Psychobiographical methodology: The case of William James. In L. Wheeler (Ed.), *Review of personality and social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 245-272). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Anderson, J. W. (1981b). The methodology of psychological biography. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11(3), 455-475. doi: 10.2307/203628
- Arlow, J. A. (2005). Psychoanalysis. In R. J. Corsini & D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current psychotherapies* (7th ed., pp. 15-51). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Brabant, E., Falzeder, E., & Giampieri-Deutsch, P. (Eds.). (1993). *The correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi*, Volume I: 1908-1914. Boston, MA: Belknap Press.

- Elms, A. C. (1994). *Uncovering lives: The uneasy alliance of biography and psychology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Elms, A. C. (2005). Freud as Leonardo: Why the first psychobiography went wrong. In W. T. Schultz (Ed.), *Handbook of psychobiography* (pp. 210–222). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Elms, A. C., & Heller, B. (2005). Twelve ways to say “lonesome”: Assessing error and control in the music of Elvis Presley. In W. T. Schultz (Ed.), *Handbook of psychobiography* (pp. 142–157). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Erikson, E. E. (1968). On the nature of psychohistorical evidence: In search of Gandhi. *Daedalus*, 97, 695–730.
- Erikson, E. H. (1969). *Gandhi's truth: On the origins of militant nonviolence*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Falzeder, E., & Brabant, E. (Eds.). (1996). *The correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi, Vol. 2: 1914-1919*. Boston, MA: Belknap Press
- Freud, E. L. (Ed.). (1992). *Letters of Sigmund Freud* (selected and edited by E. L. Freud). New York, NY: Dover.
- Freud, S. (1972). Letter from Freud to Lou Andreas-Salome, February 9, 1919. In E. Pfeiffer (Ed.), *Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé: Letters* (W. & E. Robson-Scott, Trans.) (pp. 90–91). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Freud, S. (1974a). Letter from Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, November 11, 1909. In W. McGuire (Ed.), *The Freud/Jung letters: The correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (R. Manheim & R. F. C. Hull, Trans.): Bollingen Series XCIV (pp. 259–262). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freud, S. (1974b). Letter from Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, October 17, 1909. In W. McGuire (Ed.), *The Freud/Jung letters: The correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (R. Manheim & R. F. C. Hull, Trans.): Bollingen Series XCIV (pp. 252–256). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freud, S. (1974c). Letter from Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, November 21, 1909. In W. McGuire (Ed.), *The Freud/Jung letters: The correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (R. Manheim & R. F. C. Hull, Trans.): Bollingen Series XCIV (pp. 265–267). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freud, S. (1985). Letter from Freud to Fliess, October 9, 1898. In J. M. Masson (Ed. & Trans.), *The complete letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904* (pp. 330-331). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freud, S. (1989). *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (A. Tyson, Trans. & J. Strachey, Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 11, pp. ix–xxiii). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co. (Original work published 1910)
- Gay, P. (1989). Sigmund Freud: A brief life (Introduction). In S. Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (A. Tyson, Trans. & J. Strachey, Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 11, pp. ix–xxiii). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Jacoby, R. (2009, September 21). When Freud came to America. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Freuds-Visit-to-ClarkU/48424>
- Jones, E. (1953-1957). *The life and work of Sigmund Freud* (Vols. 1 – 3). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kasser, T. (2017). Integrating psychobiography into psychology's mainstream: Introduction to the special section. *American Psychologist*, 72(5), 430–433. doi: 10.1037/amp0000157
- Kövényi, Z. (2011). Psychobiography as a method. The revival of studying lives: New perspectives in personality and creativity research. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 7(4), 739-777. doi: 10.5964/ejop.v7i4.162
- Langer, W. C. (1972). *The mind of Adolph Hitler*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

- Merezhkovsky, D. S. (1904). *The romance of Leonardo da Vinci*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam & Sons.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2012). *A psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the genius, mystery, and psychological decline of a world chess champion*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2013). Case study in psychobiographical ethics: Bobby Fischer, World Chess Champion. *Journal of Empirical Research in Human Research Ethics*, 8(4), 19–27. doi: 10.1525/jer.2013.8.4.19
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2014a). Best practices in psychobiographical research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 1(1), 77–90. doi: 10.1037/qap0000005.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2014b, February 27). The art and craft of psychobiography. *Counseling Today*, 56(9), 54–62.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). John F. Kennedy, Jr. and the torn self: A psychological portrait. *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 44(3), 221–241.
- Ponterotto, J. G., & Reynolds, J. D. (2017). Ethical and legal considerations in psychobiography. *American Psychologist*, 72(5), 446–458. doi: 10.1037/amp0000047
- Ponterotto, J. G., Reynolds, J. D., Morel, S., & Cheung, L. (2015). Psychobiography training in psychology in North America: Mapping the field and charting a course. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 11(3), 459–474. doi: 10.5964/ejop.v11i3.938
- Runyan, W. M. (1981). Why did Van Gogh cut off his ear? The problem of alternative explanations in psychobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40(6), 107–1077. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.40.6.1070
- Runyan, W. M. (1982). *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Schultz, W. T. (2005). Introducing psychobiography. In W. T. Schultz (Ed.), *Handbook of psychobiography* (pp. 3–18). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Schultz, W. T. (2011). *Tiny terror: Why Truman Capote (almost) wrote Answered Prayers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Schultz, W. T., & Lawrence, S. (2017). Psychobiography: Theory and method. *American Psychologist*, 72(5), 434–445. doi: 10.1037/amp0000130
- Simmons, L. (2006). *Freud's Italian journey*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Strachey, J. (1989). Editor's note: Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci. In S. Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (A. Tyson, Trans. & J. Strachey, Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 11, pp. 3–7). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.