

Psychobiography and the Study of Lives: Interview with William McKinley Runyan

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Around 1986, when I first became aware of psychobiography through a seminar taught by Alan Elms at UC Davis, there was, apart from a number of wonderful articles by Alan himself, just one book the aspiring psychobiographer could turn to for guidance, support, and reassurance. This was William McKinley Runyan's [Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method](#) (1982). My perspective might be a little less wide than that of others, but it seems to me now that that one book--partly because of when it emerged on the intellectual landscape, and partly because of its evident scholarship--did more for the field of psychobiography than any other book before or since (with the possible exception of Elms' own [Uncovering Lives](#), another benchmark in the field's emergence). It was as if the fact of that book's existence made it possible to imagine a career in psychobiography. The book really did define a field--and continues to do so.

At some point "Mac" paid a visit to the seminar. Being the callow zealot that I was, I prepared for the arrival of a kind of movie star. What I got instead was much better: a sincere, genuine, slightly quiet, totally unprepossessing scholar of warmth and generosity--an absence of ego combined with an abundance of hard-earned learning. Now that I have got to know Mac fairly well, my opinion has not changed in the slightest. He remains the psychobiographer's psychobiographer, and he still sets the highest standards for work in the field.

This interview was a chance to get his current ideas about a set of questions psychobiographers continue to work through every day and at every step in the psychobiographical process. Having been there at the very beginning, his perspective is obviously uniquely valuable.

William "Mac" Runyan is presently a Professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his PhD in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice from Harvard in 1975. In addition to the pathbreaking book [Life Histories and Psychobiography](#):

Explorations in Theory and Method (Oxford University Press, 1982), Professor Runyan also edited Psychology and Historical Interpretation (Oxford University Press, 1988). His current work is focused on figures in the history of psychology, including Henry Murray, William James, and others.

WTS: I'm going to begin with vital statistics, so to speak. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

WMR: I was born in 1947 in New York City, where my parents had been living on Perry Street in Greenwich Village. When I was born, they moved to suburban New Jersey, and in 1950 to Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. In 1961, we moved to Hudson, Ohio.

WTS: What about religious/ethnic background?

WMR: My parents were American citizens, of French, English, Scotch, and Dutch descent, and were Christian Scientists.

WTS: Occupations of your father and mother?

WMR: My father was a lawyer for Goodyear Aerospace, then for Goodyear, in Akron, Ohio. My mother was a housewife. Then, when my brother and I were finishing High school, she went back to school to get a Ph.D. in English at Kent State University, and then was a lecturer in English at Kent State and Akron University. Additional information on my family background is in a chapter titled "On Coming to Understand my Father: A Personal and Professional Journey," which is to come out this December in a book called Between Fathers and Sons.

WTS: Where did you get your undergraduate degree?

WMR: I received a BA from Oberlin College in 1969, with majors in sociology and psychology.

WTS: Current professional positions and affiliations?

WMR: Professor, School of Social Welfare, U.C. Berkeley; and Affiliated Professor, Psychology Department, U.C. Berkeley. I'm also a Research Psychologist at the Institute of Personality and Social Research, U.C. Berkeley.

WTS: What is the "School of Welfare"?

WMR: The School of Social Welfare is a professional school at U.C. Berkeley, giving MSW and Ph.D. degrees in social work. I teach courses there on Human Behavior and the Social

Environment, Personality Theory, and Life Histories and Case Studies. In the past, I have also taught courses on Human Development, Psychopathology and Psychosocial Problems, and on Human Development and Social Policy. The Psychology Department is a separate Department in the faculty of Arts and Sciences, where I am an Affiliated Professor.

WTS: Can you tell me a bit about what you are working on now?

WMR: I am currently interested in the psychobiographical side of the history of psychology; examining relations between the life experience, work, and social-cultural contexts of major figures in the history of psychology. I've spent the last several years doing research on figures in the history of the Harvard Psychology Department, such as Henry Murray, Robert White, Erik Erikson, B. F. Skinner, Edwin G. Boring and William James.

WTS: What brought you to a life in academia?

WMR: From high school, I thought I'd be interested in an intellectual career, and in the course of graduate school at Harvard, became more interested in pursuing a career as a professor, if that was possible.

WTS: How would you describe your primary affiliation?

WMR: A primary interest is in the study of lives, as in biography, autobiography, and psychobiography. This overlaps with psychology, sociology, anthropology, and literature.

WTS: What is the relationship between psychobiography and personality psychology?

WMR: I see psychobiography as one particular way of pursuing the study of lives, making explicit use of formal psychological theory and research in interpreting individual lives. I'm also interested in personality psychology primarily in the ways that it overlaps with the study of lives. Personality psychology includes general theories of personality, efforts to measure dimensions of behavior, and studies of particular processes and classes of behavior. I tried to outline my understanding of the relations between these four types of personality psychology in a chapter on "Studying Lives: Psychobiography and the Conceptual Structure of Personality" in the Handbook of Personality Psychology (1997).

WTS: How do you define psychobiography anyway?

WMR: I define psychobiography as the explicit use of formal psychological theory or research in the interpretation of individual lives. According to this definition, there can be psychologically insightful biography, which is not technically "psychobiography" if it is not making explicit use of

psychological theory of research. On the other side, not all psychobiography is psychologically insightful.

WTS: How do you feel about the expression, All good biography is psychobiography?

WMR: I would agree to the extent that much good biography is psychologically insightful. However, I wouldn't want to say that all good biography makes explicit use of formal psychological theory or research. In short, I'd say that good biography might be psychobiographical, but other good biography might be primarily literary, social, cultural, or historical.

WTS: Henry Murray is considered by some to be the father of psychobiography, in that he championed the study of the person--what he called the "long unit." What is your sense of Murray's importance?

WMR: I think Henry Murray was important in advocating personality psychology and "personology" or the study of lives starting in the 1930s, with his publication of Explorations in Personality (1938). As director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic from 1928, he also inspired many workers in the field, including the distinguished co-authors of Explorations in Personality, such as Robert W. White, Erik Erikson, Jerome Frank, Donald MacKinnon, Nevitt Sanford and others.

WTS: How do you assess the work of psychologists who use quantitative methods to study history and lives, such as Dean Keith Simonton and Frank Sulloway?

WMR: I think they are making important contributions to the field. My own interests are more in qualitative and interpretive approaches to the study of individual lives. Ultimately, it would be valuable to develop a better understanding of the relations between these different forms of inquiry.

WTS: Who was important to your development?

WMR: Personally, Henry A. Murray was an important influence, with his enthusiasm, charisma, and encouragement, while I was in graduate school and after. Robert W. White was also more quietly supportive, even though we differed in approaches to the study of lives, with White encouraging more life history interviewing in the study of lives, while I was drawn more to methodological and theoretical issues.

I would have liked to have had a relationship with Erik Erikson, given the overlap in our interests, but that never really developed.

As an undergraduate at Oberlin College, sociologist J. Milton Yinger was an important intellectual influence, with his book Toward a Field Theory of Behavior (1965), integrating social, cultural, and psychological levels of analysis.

At U.C. Berkeley, people at the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (now the Institute of Personality and Social Research) were intellectually and personally supportive such as Ken Craik and Ravenna Helson.

A brilliant former doctoral student and now professor at Rutgers, Jerome C. Wakefield, who received doctorates in both Social Welfare and Philosophy from U.C. Berkeley was important with friendly debates over many years about the relative values of conceptual-philosophical analysis (Wakefield) or biographical-historical analysis (myself).

WTS: What is your experience in teaching psychobiography?

WMR: I've taught a course at U.C. Berkeley on "Life Histories and Case Studies," which includes much on psychobiography ever since 1979. In recent years, I've used my book on Life Histories and Psychobiography (1982), Alan Elm's book on Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology (1994), and a psychobiography by Robert Waite, The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler (1977), as well as readings from Freud, Erikson, anthropologists and others.

WTS: What can you tell us about the Society for Personology?

WMR: This is a small group of personality psychologists which started meeting once a year in 1983 or so, many of them influenced by Henry Murray, or interested in the study of persons. Among the organizers were Silvan Tomkins, Rae Carlson, Brewster Smith, Ravenna Helson, Alan Elms, and Irving Alexander. It's a group of psychologists with serious interests in the study of lives, with many interested in psychobiography.

WTS: In the wake of September 11, 2001, a lot of people are naturally looking very closely at the life of bin Laden. I'm wondering: Let's say somebody from a Western mindset wanted to do a psychobiography of bin Laden. What are the chances such an enterprise would be successful? Is there an incommensurability between the Western and the Muslim mind?

WMR: I think a psychobiography like that could be done. A psychological analysis would be just one strand of an interpretation of bin Laden's life and to do it well one would have to learn quite a

bit about Islamic culture, his particular background in Saudi Arabia, historical events, and so on. Some people are starting to do fragments of that. For instance, I noticed on the internet just a day or two ago that Jerrold Post, who headed a division of the CIA that did personality profiles of foreign leaders, wrote a brief psychobiographical statement about bin Laden. It wasn't done in a great deal of detail, but I think it could be elaborated as one strand of a biographical, cultural, social, political, and historical analysis.

I am going to get a better sense of this myself because this Spring, I teach a course on Life Histories and Case Studies that uses material from Freudian case studies, and in the past I have done a fair amount on Hitler and Nazi Germany, looking at psychological analysis of individuals, groups, and institutions. This year I may do Nazi examples briefly but I am hoping to spend a fair amount of the course thinking about the possibility of psychologically informed studies of bin Laden, about some of the individual terrorists, and understanding at the group level what is going on with different sub-groups within Islamic, Arab, and other populations involved. Just recently I was looking at [A Prince of Our Disorder](#), the psychobiography John Mack did of Lawrence of Arabia. To me that seems like quite a successful integration of social and political history with the psychological struggles that Lawrence was going through as an individual.

WTS: I hate to say that anybody is "un-understandable." Yet the task of making psychological sense of bin Laden does seem rather daunting.

WMR: I agree that it would be a lot more difficult. One couldn't do it well just off the top of one's head, without immersing oneself in that culture and social structure, as well as historical events and processes.

WTS: I am sure we are going to see a lot of bin Laden-related articles appearing, don't you think?

WMR: I think we will. And I think such articles would be useful, if done well. But the question arises: How well does such work need to be done? It can be impossibly difficult to be perfect, but it could still be useful to produce work that is incrementally better than current understandings.

WTS: So is usefulness one of the cardinal criteria of a good psychobiographical essay?

WMR: Yes, but "useful" in a number of different ways. One way relates to political purposes or military purposes. Another way relates to our cultural understanding--for understanding cultural achievements of great writers, artists, and scientists. Then there are personal uses, benefits connected to understanding people in one's own life as well as oneself. Psychobiography can also contribute to clinical understanding.

WTS: I suppose the study of an individual could also lead to nomothetic hypotheses too, or enhance theory-building.

WMR: Yes, I think that can happen. But as argued in Life Histories and Psychobiography, I feel it is important to include the two other levels, those being group differences (by culture, gender, ethnicity, class, and historical period), and also individual lives. I still have the view that one of the goals of psychology--along with understanding general theories and group differences--should be to make sense of individual lives, whether clinical cases, cultural heroes, or figures such as Hitler, for instance, or now, bin Laden.

WTS: Why do you think the field of psychology has such antipathy, in general, for the case study? Is it because psychology always strives so desperately to be scientific at any cost, even the cost of relevance, or is there something else to it?

WMR: That is something that often puzzles me--understanding the different sources of antipathy to psychobiography. Part of it, I think, does involve an effort to be scientific, according to different conceptions of what that means. Part of it is personal, temperamental--some people are not comfortable with case studies, or want to get away from experiential case studies. I am sure, also, that there are social, interpersonal dynamics at work--imagining how one's peers are going to react to case study research.

WTS: What do you think is the primary value of psychobiography to psychology? Does psychology need psychobiography for any reason?

WMR: I think it does. The advance in our understanding of individual people and individual lives is one of the major objectives in psychology, and in the social sciences more broadly. And psychobiography, of course, is centrally concerned with that. I like the argument Alan Elms makes in Uncovering Lives. He talks about his own trajectory, from working as a "hard scientist," studying monkeys in the Panamanian jungle, and working on Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority. He then ended up studying psychobiography. Some of his peers thought he was going off the deep end by getting involved in more interpretive, historical psychology. But Elms saw it as coming back to the heart of psychology.

WTS: It is like the return of the repressed.

WMR: Or the return of some of the initial reasons undergraduates have for getting into psychology. Students may want to study individual lives, but sometimes that interest gets ground out of them as not sufficiently "scientific." It is as if psychology has now gotten "more scientific," by being more quantitative and more experimental, and can therefore by-pass the individual life. I

don't share that view. We can get more quantitative and more experimental, but can also increase our ability to understand individual lives.

WTS: I always think of psychobiography as the antidote to psychology's excessive clinging to science. One can do a very pure, precise, clean experiment that yields trivial results or one can do something perhaps a little more subjective but at the same time more interesting and more informative about the mind.

WMR: I agree. And studies of individuals can be conceived as scientific in some sense. A phrase that Stephen J. Gould often uses is "historical science," meaning analyzing "unique unrepeatable sequences of events." He is talking about evolutionary biology or historical geology, but it seems to me that some of what he is saying applies also to unique sequences of events in individual lives.

WTS: As you know I teach psychobiography, and one thing that often comes up--and I think this is a very central question--is how to go about choosing a theory to employ when looking at a life. What is your sense of how one should choose a theory, and do you think some theories are more liable to be useful than others? Then lastly, can a psychobiography be right in some sense even when the theory one employs is most likely wrong.

WMR: That is an interesting possibility. Do you have an example in mind?

WTS: I am thinking about some Freudian ideas, instances in which you have doubts in terms of an absence of experimental support, but at the same time the theory seems persuasive as a way of making sense of a particular life. But going back to the very first question: How do you personally go about choosing a theory to use?

WMR: It seems to me it can happen in a number of different ways. Sometimes one knows a lot about a life and then begins searching for a theory as a means of making sense of it. I think of Robert Tucker and the work he did on Stalin. He wrote a multi-volume psychological biography of Stalin, and a chapter about the process of doing it in the book I edited on Psychology and Historical interpretation.

He had already known a lot about Stalin, having worked at the American embassy in Moscow, and married a Russian woman. He wasn't allowed to leave Russia until Stalin died. After encountering Karen Horney's theory, he felt it explained a lot about the grandiose self-image that he saw Stalin actively creating. It was a case of happening upon a theory that seemed to fit.

Another example is Robert Waite's biography of Hitler--The Psychopathic God. Waite draws on fragments from a wide variety of theories, including classical psychoanalysis and

Eriksonian theory. He also makes use of empirical findings concerning people who are born with one testicle--which Waite believes was true of Hitler.

WTS: So one approach would be "eclecticism."

WMR: That's one option. Or else, as in the first example, one just happens upon a theory that seems to illuminate what is already known about the life. Rather than deciding in advance what theory one is going to use, maybe it is better to start with the life itself, and as your understanding about the life develops, to then start thinking more along the lines of what theories seems best to fit. Does that make sense?

WTS: It does. Yet I was thinking, also, that there are a number of psychobiographies that do not seem to make use of any theory.

WMR: What are you thinking of?

WTS: Cases in which the theory is more implicit than explicit. Some of Alan Elms' writings are along those lines. The theory is almost invisible, although there is, of course, an extremely psychologically-informed interpretation.

WMR: Right. One example I think of is Jean Strouse's book on Alice James, sister of William and Henry James. There was an explicit attempt to make the theory invisible. My guess, in that case, is that she used the theory fairly self-consciously, but then in writing things up decided to keep it in the background.

WTS: Sometimes the theory is a road block to a smooth reading. If it's too prominently displayed, it gets in the way of the narrative.

WMR: I was thinking about what you had asked earlier--if bad theory can lead to useful interpretations. It seems possible with parts of psychoanalytic theory, because there are so many different defense mechanisms, for instance, and one can just leave out those portions of the theory that seem wrong.

WTS: This is going backwards in a way, but why is psycho-biography something that you do? I know, for me, I was always interested in Freud and in literature, so psychobiography was a perfect vehicle for combining those two interests.

WMR: Psychoanalysis and Literature?

WTS: Right. What made it especially exciting for you or what drew you to it?

WMR: I had a somewhat different path into it because for me, when I started graduate school in 1969, there was a program at Harvard called Clinical Psychology and Public Practice. At an opening retreat, people were supposed to say what they were interested in, what they were planning to work on. During that summer I formulated the idea that what I was most interested in was studying life histories. At that point, I didn't connect so much with psychobiography, but I was interested in studying lives. That was a way to integrate interests I had in consciousness and subjectivity, and also to utopian communities--which I wrote a thesis on. Studying individual lives seemed to be a way of looking at the kinds of experiences people have or could have in different societies or different social/cultural arrangements. So the program that I conceived then was to try to use social scientific methods to study individual lives--I wrote my dissertation on that. In 1975, when I finished the dissertation, there was not much included on psychobiography; I thought it was too narrowly reductionistic in trying to explain lives by drawing on psychology alone, without attending enough to social/cultural/biological/economic factors. Then, when I started writing my book, I found that good psychobiographies included much on social and cultural contexts, and were not reducing everything to psychological causes.

WTS: The psychological was just one piece of the whole puzzle.

WMR: I ended up titling my book Life Histories and Psychobiography. That was partially because of a change of my own conceptions. Initially I was doing just "Life Histories" and then, seeing that a lot of what I cared about was also being done by at least some people in psychobiography, I added that term. Initially, I didn't have a sympathetic exposure to psychodynamic theory. In graduate school I got more exposure to humanistic psychology, through those influenced by Carl Rogers, and also to behavioral critiques of psychoanalytic theory. It wasn't really until after I got out of graduate school that I became more sympathetic to the value of psychodynamic theory, particularly for biographical interpretation.

WTS: There are those bad psychobiographies out there, that seem to imply that the psychological is the only thing that needs to be understood. And it's always interesting to me how people latch onto those bad examples and then use them to advance the specious argument that psychobiography is somehow intrinsically flawed. As if there can't be, say, bad car mechanics, but car mechanics in general, could be sound.

I was curious if you ever found yourself idealizing or devaluing your subject, or strongly identifying with a subject to such a degree that it became a problem. I remember when I was doing my dissertation, which was on the writer James Agee, there was a period of time during which I thought I was Agee. So I got aware of that, and I noticed it as a problem. I tried to get a little bit more distance on things. Although I think I still do idealize him in some ways. I don't

know if I'll ever get over that. But have you ever had a similar experience, or if you haven't, in general, how should one combat that sort of thing? What should one do about it?

WMR: I think that particular phenomenon may have happened to me less because I seem to focus more on methodological and conceptual issues. I use examples of Van Gogh or King George III or Hitler, but I've never spent years and years working on one person. Except, I may have to modify that because it seems I've been working on the lives of psychologists quite a bit lately, going back and rethinking aspects of Henry Murray or Freud or Skinner in surprising ways. I probably idealized Murray, particularly in graduate school. That relationship meant a lot to me. Then I read and wrote a review of the Murray biography by Forrest Robinson. That was very engaging and I spent a tremendous amount of time on the review. I wanted to be fair to the book, to the different sides of Murray, and to my feelings about him. I learned a lot from the book and I wrote a review in "Contemporary Psychology" that was quite sympathetic to it. Yet after writing the review, I was less satisfied with the book. It didn't do justice to Murray in some respects--how charismatic and engaging he was to talk with. He was so insightful about so many things. And the book argues how deluded he was, especially in his relationship with Christiana Morgan. There may be something to that, but in the biography it may have been exaggerated.

WTS: That seems to be the real focus of the book, without a doubt.

WMR: I agree. But at the same time I learned a lot about their relationship, a lot that I didn't know. I knew they had had a relationship, but I did not know much about the dynamics of it. I also learned a lot about the meaning of Melville for Murray--how he got so engaged in Melville's life and work, and particularly Melville's novel Pierre. According to Robinson, Murray and Morgan saw a lot of their own relationship reflected in the central love relationship in Pierre. That may have been one source for Murray's interest in the book, and in Melville. And also why he wrote a 90-page introduction to Pierre later on.

WTS: I've taken a look at that before, but never read all 90 pages.

WMR: It always puzzled me why Murray never finished his biography of Melville, which supposedly reached around a thousand pages back in the 1930s. He never published it. Robinson offers an interpretation of that, centering on how Murray was too involved with it, or how Melville's life ended too tragically. Maybe Murray did not want to work through that period of Melville's life, or maybe it was too revealing of Murray. So, as far as idealization--I'm sure I idealized Murray, but I do so less now, partly as a result of reading Robinson's book, and rethinking what Murray was doing and how he related to others. I also re-read a lot of Murray, and parts I admire, and parts I feel don't work that well. I wonder: if I met him again, would I feel

differently about him? I expect I would, but he was still an important person in my life. It was tremendously interesting to talk with him.

WTS: I've got one more question for you. Sometimes my students will say: All these interpretations of a life are equal, and I can't decide which one is right, and if that is true, then there is nothing to psychobiography, because all interpretations of a life cancel one another out. I would like to hear your reply to this.

WMR: If two or three interpretations seem fairly plausible, that is one thing. But it is unlikely anyone thinks all interpretations are equally plausible. We could make up an outrageous one, such as: Martians came in during the night and replaced a person's brain in order to produce behavioral changes. That would probably not be an equally compelling explanation. I think one of the tasks of psychobiography is to look critically at interpretations over time, and to collect more evidence, so that some grow more persuasive and others less so. In Life Histories and Psychobiography, I examined 13 different psychodynamic explanations of why Van Gogh cut off part of his left ear and gave it to a prostitute shortly before Christmas in 1888. Some explanations seem less persuasive than others, especially those with little relevant evidence. One explanation of Van Gogh's breakdown that seems to have considerable support is that Vincent, who was emotionally and financially dependent on his brother, Theo, may have been distressed at the prospect of losing the love and attention of his brother to his new fiancée.

WTS: That is the explanation my students tend to find the most persuasive. I always have them read that piece of yours, of course--on why van Gogh cut off his ear. They also seem to like the explanation which says he did it because he was hearing voices, and in his psychotic state he felt like if he cut off his ear the voices would disappear. It is always interesting to see which ones they find the most persuasive, because then you can start asking why. And by asking that question you can start identifying qualities of persuasive explanations generally.

WMR: I think that is a good way of doing it--getting a sense of what people find more or less persuasive and then looking for features of the more persuasive explanations. Explanations can be evaluated in light of criteria such as: 1) how logically sound they are, 2) how much of the evidence they account for, 3) how much they stand up to attempted falsification or 4) how consistent they are with other knowledge you have about the person.

WTS: One final question. What do you think is the future of the field?

WMR: Such a big question. Maybe recent events suggest a response. One thing that led to an advance in psychobiography or psychohistory was so many scholars trying to understand Nazi Germany, or German character, or the psychology of anti-Semitism. I would guess that trying to

understand some of the tensions in the relationships between the Islamic and the Arab world and the Western world might produce a need for interpretations drawing on psycho-biographical or psycho-historical factors, and at the same time paying explicit attention to cultural history, religious history, and social economic conditions. My feeling is that this might become a significant influence on the field. At least, personally, it is going to be an influence on me, in terms of the talks I give and the courses I teach. In both cases I will make some effort to link to those sets of events.

WTS: Do you think psychobiography is becoming more acceptable within mainstream psychology?

WMR: I hope so, although there are signs on both sides. I think that the emergence of narrative models is encouraging--paying attention to narrative interpretive approaches in psychology. Some people still sneer at that kind of stuff. Then again, everyone doesn't need to get persuaded. In my view, one of the challenges of psychology is to better understand how general theories and quantitative research interact with advances in our understanding of individual lives.

WTS: Thank you Mac.

WMR: Thanks, Todd. I enjoyed the interview.