Perceptive observers have long noticed that there is an intimate connection between the personal life of psychologists—their experiences, troubles, preoccupations, and conflicts—and the psychological ideas and theories they create. Often this connection is spoken of as surprising or humorous. Henry A. Murray (personal communication, 1975), himself an influential psychological theorist, was talking with me once about Erik Erikson, whom he had known for many years. He pointed out that Erikson’s theory of human development did not fit everyone but applied to Erikson and people like him very well. Then he chuckled and, referring to theories of human development in general, said, “They’re all autobiographies, every one of them.”

I work in Chicago, the same city where Heinz Kohut, the pre- eminent theorist of narcissism, lived. I frequently heard stories about his narcissism (along with recollections of his brilliance, I should add). He loved it when he was honored on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday; he read his new writings to his inner circle but did not want to hear any criticisms; as a young man he slept with a hairnet to preserve his pompadour. Everyone said, “Well, of course he wrote about narcissism.”

Two outstanding books explore the connection between the theorist and the theory. Here is how each describes this relationship.

Amy Demorest (2005), speaking about Sigmund Freud, B.F. Skinner, and Carl Rogers, states, “In developing a model for understanding all human lives, each man drew on his own particular life. In seeking to make objective claims about all people, these theorists were influenced by the subjective experience of themselves as individual persons” (p. 4). She goes on to argue that the differences between the three theories “result from differences in the life experiences of their originators and the personal concerns that emerged from those experiences” (p. 4).

“[T]he subjective world of the theorist,” write George E. Atwood and Robert D. Stolorow (1993), “is inevitably translated into his metapsychological conceptions and hypotheses regarding human nature” (p. 5). (The term “metapsychological” refers to a theorist’s overarching conceptions.) Atwood and Stolorow examine four psychologists—Freud, Carl G. Jung, Wilhelm Reich, and Otto Rank—and conclude that, through these conceptions, “each theorist’s solutions to his own dilemmas and nuclear crises became frozen in a static intellectual system that, to him, was an indisputable vision of objective reality” (p. 175).

Before continuing, I would like to make it clear that I am not claiming that theorists’ own lives are the sole source of their psychological theories. The work of any theorist develops in close interaction with the intellectual trends of the day. For example, there was much talk and writing about the unconscious, sexuality, and determinism at the time when Freud was creating his theories (see Arnold and Atwood, chap. 17 this vol., on Friedrich Nietzsche, who, independently of Freud, had similar insights into the workings of the psyche.) In addition, theorists do not develop their theories only on the basis of their personal experience. They always have other sources that they observe and to which they apply their ideas. It is hard to imagine that Freud
would have developed his theory if he had not encountered hysterical patients who suffered from symptoms that seemed to result from unconscious forces. Likewise, Skinner's experimentation with rats and pigeons was the immediate source of many of his concepts. I am claiming, however, that theorists are drawn to explore certain areas because these areas have been meaningful in their own lives, and ultimately they become convinced of their conclusions only if these conclusions are consistent with their own experience. There is, moreover, a dynamic interaction between theorists and their ideas. Their ideas help them understand themselves and often enable them to work out vexing problems. Sometimes the ideas serve a defensive function; that is, the ideas protect them from a threat to their self-esteem or their self-cohesion. Here I give two examples of theorists and how their central psychological ideas were closely related to difficulties in their own lives: Freud and Erikson.

Freud put a great emphasis on his concept of the Oedipus complex. Once he referred to it as the "shibboleth" of psychoanalysis, in the sense that acceptance of this concept distinguished those who were adherents of psychoanalysis from those who were opponents (Freud, 1905/1953, p. 226). In the Oedipus complex, the little boy not only wants to be close to his mother but also desires her sexually, and he not only experiences rivalry with his father over possession of the mother but also wants to kill his father. Freud grew up in a familial situation ripe for the development of just this kind of a complex. His father was forty-one and his mother twenty-one when he was born. He was just about as close in age to his mother as was his father. As a boy he may have thought to himself, "Why should my father—rather than I—the one who gets to sleep with her?" He was his mother's favorite child; she always saw him as special and called him "my golden Sigi." We know from his childhood memories that he remembered his father as being much more negative toward him. At the age of seven or eight, he once urinated in his parents' bedroom. His censoring father commented, "The boy will come to nothing" (Anderson, 2001, pp. 10–11).

During his self-analysis, Freud was shocked and dismayed when he discovered his own Oedipus complex. He concluded that his "libido" toward his mother had been "awakened" during his third year when he had the opportunity to see her naked. His discomfort is palpable. Despite writing to his closest friend, he cannot bring himself to use the common German words for "mother" and "naked" but instead resorts to the more distancing Latin words, matrem and nudam (Masson, 1985, p. 268). He was similarly uncomfortable in speaking about his rivalry with his father.

Freud's personal experience of learning about his desire for his mother and his conflict with his father played a central role in his being able to formulate the concept of the Oedipus complex. On the one hand, his having had this experience sensitized him to perceiving a similar pattern in the experiences of others, particularly his patients. He was attuned to the possibility of primal feelings—lust, hatred, rivalry—arising in the hothouse atmosphere of the nuclear family. On the other hand, his development of the concept had a defensive aspect. He was troubled by his guilt; it seemed awful to him that he had felt this way toward his parents. But he could relieve much of this guilt by saying that an Oedipus complex is virtually universal. Freud had no reason to feel badly about himself if just about every little boy feels toward his parents as he did.

If the Oedipus complex is central to Freud's psychological theory, the concept of identity is equally central to Erik Erikson's theory. Identity, as explained by Erikson, refers to a person's view of oneself; constructing a workable identity may be difficult, because an identity must integrate the disparate facets of oneself while also garnering respect and acknowledgement from society. A person who has trouble forming an identity goes through an "identity crisis."

"[I]f ever an identity crisis was central and long drawn out in somebody's life," Erikson wrote, "it was so in mine" (Coles, 1970, p. 180). He noted that he had many "marginalities." Lawrence J. Friedman (1999), in his biography of Erikson, expands on what Erikson discusses and brings out a great many conflicts that Erikson had within himself, between himself and his parents, and between himself and society. Integrating various aspects of himself into a workable identity was a formidable task. Erikson never knew his father, who presumably was a mother was Danish and up in Germany. When his mother married a German to make matters more c told this man was his father. He was a Gentile. The Gentile was a Jew. At one point he was a German nationalist, but him as a "Dane." As he career, he wanted to be a physician from his family, who both.

Erikson went through adulthood when he was adult he characterized as "borders on the boundary between." "[S]ome of my friends will insist that I need to see it in everybody else to terms with myself." (Coles, 1970, p. 180)

The implication is that therapeutic for Erikson is of the identity crisis. He self and could feel at pain and disturbance of analyzing the process.

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Erikson went through a period in his early adulthood when he was significantly troubled. He notes that at times his disturbances would be characterized as “borderline,” that is, as being on the boundary between neurosis and psychosis. “[S]ome of my friends,” he acknowledged, “will insist that I need to name this crisis and to see it in everybody else in order to really come to terms with myself” (Erikson, 1970, p. 742).

The implication is that there was something therapeutic for Erikson in developing his concept of the identity crisis. He could understand himself and could feel at peace over his period of confusion and disturbance after he had found a way of analyzing the process of identity formation.

As with Freud and his concept of the Oedipus complex, Erikson’s personal experience played a key role in his being able to develop his concept of identity. Erikson’s struggles in constructing a workable identity showed him in stark relief the different aspects of identity, such as how an identity must fit with one’s background while also being accepted by others. What he had encountered sensitized him to difficulties in identity formation; when he observed people going through something similar, he was attuned to their experiences. On the other hand, there also may be a defensive side to his development of the concept of identity. He felt ashamed that he had struggled through a period of psychopathology, but, evoking his concept, he could say that he merely had had an identity crisis, something that a great many people experience. He argued, moreover, that an identity crisis can be a “normative crisis”; although painful and sometimes malignant, it offers “a high growth potential” (Erikson, 1959, pp. 116–117). (For a psychobiographical discussion of Erikson in more depth, see Alexander, chap. 18 this vol.)

As noted above, observers have often seen that there was a close connection between a theorist’s life and ideas. Frequently they use their perception of this connection for partisan purposes; they invoke it in order to attack the ideas, sometimes brutally. In a passage of this kind, Emil Ludwig (1947/1973), a biographer of Freud, wrote in 1947, “The characteristics of Freud’s dogmas and visions, then, might well be a product of his own aberrations, as implanted in him by childish experience.” “Bluntly, thousands of neurotics each year,” he insisted, “are declared sex maniacs because the founder of psychoanalysis was himself a sexopath. Thousands of the healthy are declared sick because one man was sick, and believed that the gloomy symptoms rising out of his childhood were common to all” (pp. 281–282).

Ludwig’s claims are outlandish because his psychobiographical analysis of Freud is so polemical and amateurish. But what especially interests me here is his underlying argument; he assumes that if a theorist’s ideas stem from his so-called “childish experience,” then those ideas are automatically wrong. He has made the “genetic fallacy.” Actually, a theory’s accuracy is independent of its origins. The first person who posited that the earth rotates on its axis may have been hit in the head with a falling apple and, feeling dizzy, declared that the earth was spinning. The personal factors involved in the derivation of a theory neither support nor contradict its standing.

Showing a connection between the theorist and the theory does not invalidate the theory. I would argue, in fact, that with personality theories there is always such a connection. As with Freud and Erikson, a theorist is drawn to a particular area of experience because it has been prominent in his own life. He cares about this area; he is motivated to investigate it, to try to make sense of it. Why would a theorist concern himself deeply with something that did not have
personal meaning for him? The theorist also becomes sensitized to this aspect of being human. He is able to perceive its workings in the lives of others, while most observers would overlook it, and he is thereby enabled to study it in others.

There is a fantasy that discoveries in personality psychology come about in another way. Many people might imagine that psychologists objectively study people and through empirical research simply find what is there. But psychobiographical studies have shown that the field does not operate in that way. Theorists use themselves as their first and most convincing model of what people are like. As Demorest (2005) convincingly demonstrates, even for Skinner, who developed his system through rigorous research with rats and pigeons, a key source of his basic concept, the controlling influence of external reinforcement, was personal.

In addition to providing insight into how the creative process works in psychological theorizing, the psychobiographical approach to the study of psychologists offers six benefits.

1. Psychobiography helps us understand psychological theories better. Because a theorist’s own experience provided major input as the theorist developed a concept, we can often find in the theorist’s own life a striking and illustrative example of the workings of the concept. For example, Freud’s experience shows us what an Oedipus complex might be like, and in Erikson’s developmental history we can see the difficulties of identity formation.

Another example pertains to the work of Kohut, who developed an influential school of thought within psychoanalysis called self psychology. Kohut (1979) wrote a paper that purports to be an account of a patient, called Mr. Z., who had two analyses with him, one before and one after Kohut developed his new ideas. But, as Strozier (2001) has shown, there was no such person as Mr. Z. Instead, Kohut was writing about himself. The so-called first analysis of Mr. Z. is Kohut’s own training analysis. The second analysis is Kohut’s account of how he himself would be understood, and treated, in the light of the ideas of self psychology. We can look to this paper to see how Kohut’s key ideas apply to his own experience.

2. Psychobiography helps us find a theorist’s blind spots and limitations. Knowing about the personal life of theorists brings our attention to shortcomings in their theories. There is a famous story involving Gordon Allport. As a young man, Allport visited Freud. He wanted to meet the founder of psychoanalysis. Sitting in Freud’s presence, he cast around for something to say. He told Freud about seeing a boy in the tram on the way to the office. The boy was preoccupied with dirt and had a mother who seemed orderly and dominating. Freud looked at Allport and asked, “And was that little boy you?” “It honestly was not,” Allport claims (Elms, 1972, p. 628). Allport believes Freud was in error and missed his actual motivation, which was to talk about something that would interest Freud.

Murray, who had known Allport for decades, commented to me once on this same story. He said that Freud’s remark was “very clever” because “that’s just what Allport is. I mean, he is a very fastidious person; he is very clean himself. . . . Freud just hit him right on the head, right on the nose” (Anderson, 1990, p. 326).

“Experience taught me,” Allport (1968) claims, “that depth psychology, for all its merits, may plunge too deep, and that psychologists would do well to give full recognition to manifest motives before probing the unconscious” (p. 384). Indeed, Allport went on to develop a valuable psychological approach, but one in which short shrift was given to deeper motives. Elms (1972, p. 630; also see Elms, 1994, pp. 71-84) argues that Allport did not just react to this one incident. Rather, his background emphasized piety, morality, hard work, and orderliness. Hence, it did not take the encounter with Freud for a “high-minded and clean little boy” to grow up to be a psychological theorist who emphasizes high-mindedness and avoids the dirty or unsavory side of life.

This psychobiographical consideration of Allport’s experience helps us see a limitation in his psychological theorizing. He had a blindness to the darker side of life and tended to overlook it and downplay it. He did not like to think of people as having deep motivations, sexual conflicts, and disabling neuroses.

Barenbaum (chap. 16 this vol.) provides a more detailed psychobiographical study of Allport and takes up this same stc Freud. She argues that, for Allport, in his admiration of Freud, he was too thick a skin for Allport, in which an admired person, a son, and then gains what he sees as a suit.

There is ample evidence of his relationship with the little boy’s doing about the boy’s thoughts about his host family and his fear (1933/1955) describing and son as “altogether free from ambivalent ships” (p. 133). Toringly that Freud was too thick with his mother and was too threatening for these feelings conscious against them by press that Freud was written by virtual girls, however, his variations. come flow p. pp. 515-526; also see Freud’s personal account of his theory concerning about masculine p. difficulties with father and with mothers. The psychoanalysis of how Fr. of the mother. It is the his original notes have history, there is only t patient’s mother, while on the patient’s troubled Oedipal) relationship according to the origina often made reference to.

In other words, a standing of Freud suggests the problematic of his own mother. To our attention to a blin underestimated the role psychological lives. He hostility between a son a to overlook the role of
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takes up this same story of Allport’s meeting with Freud. She argues that it reflects a common pattern for Allport, in which he tries to connect with an admired person, suffers rejection and humiliation, and then gains vindication by developing what he sees as a superior approach.

There is ample evidence that Freud idealized his relationship with his mother. In talking about the little boy’s development, he has much to say about the boy’s troubles with his father, emphasizing the boy’s hostility and rivalry toward his father and his fear of castration. But Freud (1933/1955) describes the relationship of mother and son as “altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships” (p. 133). Tomkins has argued convincingly that Freud was traumatically disappointed with his mother and felt betrayed by her, but it was too threatening for him to become aware of these feelings consciously, and so he protected against them by preserving the mother, in his theoretical writings about boys and their mothers, as being virtually faultless. In talking about girls, however, his various recriminations against mothers come flowing out (Tomkins, 1963, pp. 515–526; also see Abraham, 1982).

Freud’s personal experience seems to have limited his theory construction so that in writing about masculine psychology he emphasized difficulties with fathers and overlooked difficulties with mothers. The case of the patient called the Rat Man (Freud, 1909/1955) provides an illustration of how Freud underplayed the role of the mother. It is the only case of his for which his original notes have survived. In Freud’s case history, there is only the barest mention of the patient’s mother, while a great emphasis is placed on the patient’s troubles (and, one should add, Oedipal) relationship with his father. But, according to the original case notes, the patient often made reference to his mother.

In other words, a psychobiographical understanding of Freud suggests that he avoided looking at the problematical side of his relationship with his own mother. This understanding draws our attention to a blind spot in his theory. He underestimates the role of mothers in their sons’ psychological lives. He is quick to see rivalry and hostility between a son and a father, but he tended to overlook the role of mothers.

(3) Psychobiography reads us to beware of overgeneralizations. It is easy to see why a theorist might overgeneralize. Anyone will come to see the world based on the model of one’s own experience. If a person has grown up in the midst of war, he would tend to view all the world as rife with conflict and killing. If another person went through childhood with an affectionate, attentive mother, she would be likely to visualize mothers as loving and caring. Overgeneralization is a part of the human condition. Since theorists base their theories on their own experience, they tend to see everyone’s experience as being much like their own.

Moreover, as Atwood and Stolorow (1993) emphasize, there is a defensive aspect to theory building in psychology that further encourages overgeneralization. As described above with both Freud and Erikson, theorists often derive a psychological benefit from seeing their concepts as being applicable to just about everyone. Freud, by claiming that Oedipal complexes are ubiquitous, gained relief from his guilt over having lustful desire for his mother and murderous hostility toward his father. Erikson overcame his shame regarding his period of intense psychological disturbance by claiming that a great many people go through identity crises and that such a crisis can be valuable; it can result in unusual growth and creativity.

Freud (1905/1953, p. 226) regards the Oedipus complex as being the “nuclear” complex of the neuroses—of all neuroses—in the sense that it “constitutes the essential part of their content.” When someone speaks of his favored concept in such terms, it is a deadly giveaway that he is guilty of overgeneralization.

(4) Psychobiography helps demystify theorists; it helps us not to idolize them. As we look at the lives of the most influential theorists, we see that they had the same personal difficulties as other people. They grappled, given the inevitably narrow range of their experience, to construct the best theories that they could. We can have a properly critical attitude toward their ideas. We can say that, indeed, these are people of unusual insight who were highly motivated to try to make sense of personality. But all of them will be limited in how much they can see. We need not be intimidated by a theorist’s
pronouncements, or assume that any theorist has the final word as to what people are like. Instead, a psychobiographical approach reads us to see their ideas as having potential value while being aware that all theorists are fallible.

(5) While my emphasis has been on personality theory, psychobiography also offers benefits to our understanding of psychotherapy and psychological testing. Each psychologist develops a method of psychotherapy that is coordinated with that individual's own personality and problems. Freud suffered from repressed feelings, particularly his lust for his mother and murderous hatred of his father. Through his self-analysis, which included the study of his own dreams, he was able to get at these feelings and obtain some relief. He developed a similar system for patients that was based on gaining access to the unconscious and that included dream interpretation (Anderson, 1997).

Aaron Beck, a highly logical and controlled individual, had anxiety symptoms that started in his childhood and continued into adulthood. He was able to lessen these symptoms by using cognitive therapy, the method of psychotherapy he had developed, on himself (Weishaar, 1993).

Carl Rogers' parents had been relentlessly coercive and controlling. He grew up in a restrictive atmosphere in which dancing and card playing, let alone sex, were forbidden, and, most important, he had no freedom to think his own thoughts and make his own decisions. When he had a psychological crisis, he turned to two therapists who had learned from him how to do client-centered therapy. These therapists were able to create an atmosphere within which Rogers felt comfortable looking inside himself. "I have often been grateful that by the time I was in dire need of personal help," Rogers (1972) commented, "I had trained therapists who were . . . able to offer me the kind of help I needed." He added, "The point of view I developed in therapy is the sort of help I myself would like" (p. 58). It is not unusual that innovative psychotherapists, having found that the treatment approaches available at the time did not help them sufficiently, then go on to invent just the approach that would work best for them (Anderson, 1997).

Our awareness of the psychobiographical origins of methods of psychotherapy gives us a clear message. Any method of therapy harmonizes with some people better than others; it is particularly effective with a person who is similar to the originator of the method. Within well-developed schools of psychotherapy, such as psychoanalysis, there are a variety of techniques and methods, but still the general guideline holds: It is a mistake to think that one size fits all. Working with any patient requires finding the approach best suited to that individual.

In a similar way, psychologists design psychological tests to get at a particular aspect of experience that is most meaningful to them. Henry A. Murray, working with his colleagues at the Harvard Psychological Clinic, particularly Christiana Morgan, developed the Thematic Apperception Test. In earlier years he had lived a rather pedestrian existence, going through medical school and then studying biochemistry, when suddenly he had gotten in touch with a new realm of experience, the inner life, the area of hidden motivations and powerful emotions. Having found inspiration and excitement, he turned to psychology with the express purpose of studying this realm. He developed the Thematic Apperception Test because he was motivated to find a way of getting at and exposing fantasies, motivations, intrapsychic conflicts, and emotions (Anderson, 1999). We can use this test best if we understand that it was designed for a particular purpose.

In short, knowing about the lives of psychologists helps guide us in seeing the strengths and limitations of the psychological tests they develop.

(6) The single greatest benefit of the psychobiographical study of psychologists, in my view, is that it encourages us to be discriminating in making use of psychological theories. "[N]either the whole of truth nor the whole of good," William James (1908) once wrote, "is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the particular position in which he stands" (p. 264). Similarly, the major psychological thinkers, based on their own lives and struggles, could see deeply into certain aspects of experience. Freud made a valuable contribution in constructing the concept of the Oedipus complex, and this concept can deepen our understanding of some people, especially if we use the concept flexibly and stick close to the evidence. But would be in trying, as done, to apply the Oed.

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about the lives of psycholo the strengths and psychologi tests they develop. n the benefit of psychohologists, in my view, to be discriminating in anual theories. “[N]either a whole of good,” Wilh wrote, “is revealed to through each observer gains light from the particu tands” (p. 264). Simi- logical thinkers, based on angles, could see deeply une experience. Freud made a constructing the concept and this concept can reflexively and stick close to the evidence. But where we would go wrong would be in trying, as some psychoanalytists have done, to apply the Oedipus complex to everyone; if we did that, we would often have to distort people to fit the concept, as if we were stretching some person to put him into a Procrustean bed. At the same time, we want to keep in mind that no psychological thinker can see the whole of personality; we would be sure to limit our understanding if we adhered dogmatically to any one system and saw it as providing the ultimate answer. More than sixty years ago, Murray (1940/1981) advocated a similar stance toward psychoanalysis. He argued for making use of certain parts of Freud’s system but warned against “going in blind and swallowing the whole indigestible bolus” (p. 296).

References


