# APPLYING A STEP-WISE APPROACH IN WRITING A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY. THE CASE OF BEETHOVEN

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*Abstract*
*Psychobiography studies and focuses on the uniqueness of individuals' psychological functioning, a challenging task that, among other benefits, helps understand personality patterns, predict behaviors, revise psychological theories, and expand psychology students' knowledge about the human mind as they learn about themselves while research about others. To carry out a psychobiography of quality, it is crucial to follow a correct methodological practice. This article presents a twelve-step method used to write a psychobiography (du Plessis, 2017) offering the case of the musician and composer Ludwig van Beethoven as an example, whose 250th anniversary is being celebrated this 2020. Particular attention is given to the importance of flexibility and creativity in personality studies. To illustrate it, we present a methodological innovation as a complementary tool, an expert panel. This tool may contribute to adding solidity to the traditional proceeding. The article aims to demonstrate the usefulness, rigor, and structure that this procedure offers. It can be a resource to help those researchers interested in starting to delve into the field of psychobiography and the details of how to carry it out.*

Keywords: psychobiography; qualitative research; Beethoven; personality psychology; narrative research

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## Introduction: a reminder of what a psychobiography is

Psychobiography refers to studying a person's life, usually the life of a historical or artistic figure, with the use of psychology. It is an area of qualitative psychology whose purpose is to go deeper into individuality and to unravel the uniqueness of the individuals throughout their lives (Schultz, 2014). McAdams (1988) explained it as the "efficient use of psychological theory to convert the subject's life into a coherent and illuminating story" (p. 2).

The aim of a psychobiography is the understanding of the person (Schultz, 2005a) and the main tool used should be a careful and direct observation (Schultz, 2005b). According to Anderson (1981), the researcher must "develop an empathic relationship with his subject, a relationship which aids him in "listening" to the material through his model of the subject's personality" (p. 474). This helps the psychobiographer get deeper into the subject's psychological functioning with a subsequent interpretation, based on existing psychological theories of personality.

Psychobiography has proven to be especially useful for several reasons. First, it helps to understand the unique personality patterns. Despite people share certain features with other human beings, each person also experiences their singularity (Elms, 2007). Second, it allows predicting behaviors. An excellent example is the amount of research on politicians' behavior. The most recent study has been published by McAdams (2020) on Donald Trump. Third, it enriches the understanding of the subject by contextualizing them, because psychobiography looks at the relevant social and historical environment in which the subject lived (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2005) as well as at the subject's social skills and family story if possible (Roberts, 2002). Thus, as Carlson (1988) emphasizes, a psychobiography offers a holistic description of the individual. The fact that psychobiography is usually done on deceased people makes possible to investigate the patterns in human development throughout a continuous period. Fourth, it encourages us to rethink personality theories or approaches. Important psychologists such as Freud, Maslow and Erikson were inspired by specific life stories, like those of Leonardo da Vinci, Ruth Benedict, Max Wertheimer, and Martin Luther King, to build or reconsider their theories (Elms, 2007). Psychobiography is also a source of personality theories. Fifth, this methodology is also useful at the educational level. In-depth analyses of other lives can help psychology students expand their knowledge about the human

mind and behavior by integrating and using psychological achievements (Kőváry, 2011). Thanks to the study of lives, psychologists and students can deepen their knowledge of another person's psychological functioning and of oneself (Schultz, 2005a). It also helps the researcher develop empathy towards the subject he or she is studying (Runyan, 1984), a crucial skill in psychology, especially for future psychotherapists.

Although still unknown in some places, there is an increasing number of scientific documents that use this methodology, proving its importance and scientific value. Apart from the already consolidated *Handbook of Psychobiography*, edited by Schultz (2005a), and the chapter written by Elms (2007) included in the *Handbook of research methods in personality psychology*, Mayer and Kőváry (2019) recently published *New trends in psychobiography* updating and complementing previous published contents about this methodology.

This prolific growth of psychobiographical works has encouraged other researchers to make use of this qualitative methodological approach to keep revealing more lives that are fascinating and keep enriching the area of personality psychology in its idiographic perspective. Psychobiography, however, is not a simple work and to offer quality results we must implement the best methodological practices possible (Ponterotto, 2014).

## Objectives of this article

The present article will show how to apply the twelve steps of du Plessis (2017) offering the example of Beethoven's psychobiographical research to:
- Demonstrate the usefulness, rigor, and structure that this procedure offers and, therefore, its reliability.
- Reinforce and complement the guide with an original work.
- Emphasize the importance of being creative and flexible to adjust the method to the individual as needed.
- Help those researchers interested in starting to delve into the field.

## How to apply a psychobiographical procedure: the example of Beethoven

As the steps suggested by du Plessis (2017) have already been published in detail, in this section we are going to present a brief reminder of the theory and a further example of Beethoven psychobiography.

*Step 1 - Select the subject*

Du Plessis (2017) recommends answering certain questions about the choice of the subject to reflect on this fundamental step. For our project on Ludwig van Beethoven, these are the questions and answers that were considered.

Why this subject? The area of personality psychology has found interesting the study of artists. A few musicians have been studied in the past, although writers have been preferred as well as other artists with more tangible work. According to a broad number of handbooks, books, and encyclopedias, Beethoven is one of the most highlighted figures in the history of music, especially in the epoch commonly known as classical music, having had an enduring influence from his time to our era. Also, the fact that this year 2020 is his 250th anniversary, adds a special value to this choice.

What is the drive behind this investigation? The researcher experiences a remarkably high level of interest in music and values profoundly the classical genre. It is not possible to understand the importance of the artist without getting to know the person. Therefore, the goal is to discover, confirm or suggest hypothetical aspects of his personality, this time from a psychological perspective with the support of the rigorous science.

What does the researcher want to know about this subject? The researcher is interested not only in knowing Beethoven's main traits of personality, but especially in understanding his motivations, goals, fears, ways of dealing with difficulties as well as his relationship style.

Is this subject of interest to people other than the researcher? Yes, Beethoven has always awakened the curiosity and interest of not only professional musicians but also humanists, musicologists, psychologists, doctors, music amateurs and the general population.

Will learning about this subject help understand other similar types of people? It is likely that some of his characteristics are part of the common elements of the personality of artists. However, psychobiography is more focused on the individual, on his idiosyncrasy. Moreover, the application of this methodology and method is barely known and will help future researchers as a model to study other prominent figures.

Is there enough information available concerning this subject? Yes. There is an excess of information about Beethoven. Biographies, letters, testimonies, written conversations, as well as scores and, more surprisingly, several sketches

of many of his works. The challenging task here is to make the most adequate selection according to the reliability of the sources.

*Step 2 - Identify primary and secondary sources relating to the subject; critically evaluate the potential usefulness of these sources*

As Du Plessis (2017) indicates, the available data should consist of both primary and secondary sources if possible. They should be able to provide a broad spectrum of psychological information regarding the individual, which serves as a form of triangulation. It is also important to considerate and indicate the strengths and limitations of the selected material as Yin (2018) recommends.

For the psychobiography on Beethoven, due to a large amount of available information about the subject, the path to the final selection was long and difficult. Firstly, the specialized research centers on Beethoven around the world were located; and contemporary authors who have written about Beethoven's life and music were found. Secondly, researchers and authors from all these centers were questioned about the most accurate and reliable sources. Some were contacted through email and others presently due to the main researcher's placements. This allowed a table to build with those recommended sources alongside the reasons why they should be considered as reliable documents and why others lacked trust from each expert. In total, ten researchers offered full recommendations and argumentation regarding the appropriate sources to use for this project.

Finally, all the sources of information were confirmed making sure that they met the criteria of recommendation (saturation) as well as of accuracy for the questions and goals. Also considered the strengths and weaknesses of all these sources. They consisted of primary and secondary sources, such as *Letters of Beethoven* (Anderson, 1961), and *Beethoven* (Lockwood, 2005).

To complement and confirm certain information more related to the musical area of Beethoven's life and personality, an expert panel was included. This means, a new data source was generated. Semi-structured interviews of five musicians and musicologists that had been working on Beethoven for many years from Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States were conducted. The panel was informed about the project and its goals and all experts were asked to sign an informed consent. This interview comprised the following sections: 1. Musical characteristics, 2. Process of composition, 3. Content, 4. Interpretation, 5. Beliefs about his music, and 6. Life, historical, social, and musical influence:

thirty open questions. Those interviews would be transcribed afterwards. The researcher considered it useful to add as it would help to complement, verify and contrast the results.

*Step 3 - Identify the context in which the subject lived, and determine the amount of contextual data that is needed for the psychobiography; access this data*

As McAdams (2015) advises, to understand a person, it is essential to frame the personality in their cultural context and time. With that intention, handbooks about the sociopolitical and historical situation of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were selected and read, as well as other documents that were more focused on Beethoven's times such as *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* (DeNora, 1995).

This step would add the background needed for later psychological interpretations and avoid decontextualized results. As a simple example, to understand Beethoven's claim for being treated with more respect as a musician and composer, it was necessary to know how the idea of an artist was changing and developing back in those days. This would avoid misinterpreting and simply concluding an arrogance trait.

*Step 4 - Select an appropriate psychological theory*

Du Plessis (2017) explains that usually the subject is selected and afterwards, the theory is chosen; more exceptionally a psychological theory is chosen before the subject is selected. In this research about the German composer, the subject was first selected. Answering again recommended questions helped orientate the first ideas and final decision of the theory.

What is most suitable for this subject, grand theories, or specific explanations? A more general approach was preferable as a start. The three levels of personality by McAdams (1995) seemed to be appropriate for this purpose as it would allow specifying later as the reading continued.

What kind of theory is most appropriate, developmental theory or theory of personality? The goal was always to focus on Beethoven's personality. Although the option of a developmental theory would have offered rich information; the first stages of Beethoven are not well documented. For this reason, a developmental theory, in this case, would have shown incomplete results. Moreover, McAdams (1995) considerates a developmental path in his theory of personality, which then seemed to suit very well this project's purpose.

Is the research going to focus on psychopathology or positive approach? As a psychobiography, the aim was always a genuine reality. The results might be positive or less positive depending on the specific subject. A pathography or case study methodology would have been more appropriate to search specifically for psychopathology on a subject if that had been the main goal.

Is there going to be one or several theories? The model by McAdams (1995) includes different levels of personality that would allow the researcher to then select specific theories for specific questions located on those levels. That selection was the result of a first complete reading with the aim of allowing the data to reveal itself.

Does the selected model have empirical support? The three-level model of personality is one of the most recommended theoretical approaches for its structure and clarity, as well as for its empirical support (Schultz, 2016; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). Also, the three concrete theories that were selected later are very commonly applied nowadays and have more than enough empirical support too.

*Steps 5 and 6 - Allow the data to reveal itself and ask the data specific questions*

In these steps the researcher must show openness and allow the data to reveal itself by considering criteria for selecting relevant information. As the deconstruction is taking place, the specific questions to delve into the subject emerge (du Plessis, 2017).

Although step 4 is presented previously, all that mentioned argumentation was done throughout the first reading phase together with these following steps.

Throughout the reading of all the biographical documents about the composer, some topics stood out which gave a certain orientation about what to study specifically. Some of Alexander's (1990) and Schultz's (2003) markers of psychological salience were applied during this process. These were frequency, emphasis, interpenetration, developmental gravity, family conflict and thrownness; this last one defined by the author as "the experience of being "thrown into" a situation or quandary requiring an accounting via self-examination" (Schultz, 2003, p. 8).

Certain questions arose from the relevant biographical information that had been extracted from these markers. Therefore, each level of McAdams's model focused on a more specific area of Beethoven's personality. The Five

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Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992), for level I, was selected to analyze Beethoven's main traits, The Adult Attachment Theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), for level II, was chosen to answer questions in relation to his attachment style, and The Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993) for level III, to explore how he described his life story to himself and to others.

In summary, steps 4, 5 and 6 were conducted almost simultaneously. This means that during the first complete reading of the material, the researcher remained open to what the data could reveal by using Alexander's and Schultz's markers as well as contemplating a model that helped frame the investigation (step 5 and step 4) and the specific questions were formulated through three concrete theories of personality (step 6). This process reveals the flexibility of this method, since the steps to approach the analysis, included in what du Plessis (2017) calls data condensation, can be done in a different order depending on the subject and the available material.

*Step 7 - Develop coding strategies and code the data accordingly*

As Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) say, coding strategies are at the core of all forms of qualitative data analysis. The nature of the conclusions will depend on the decision of what to code and how to do so.

The coding strategies for this research were initially decided upon following the specific theories selected previously; considering the concrete questions. We were, however, always open to the possibility of including new content that might come up during the second reading stage, that is, psychological salient content. In parallel, the analysis of the content of the expert panel was done.

Therefore, for level I, based on the Five Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1995), the chosen categories were: 1. Openness, 2. Conscientiousness, 3. Extraversion, 4. Affability and 5. Neuroticism.

As the theory explains, each dimension of personality consists of six more specific facets; therefore, during the analysis, those facets were considered in the classification of the information for each dimension. Moreover, cross variables such as time and the specific witnesses, (who said what) were considered very carefully. As is shown, the coding strategy for level I was guided by the specific elements of the theory.

For level II, taking the Adult Attachment Theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) as a guide, clear salient data was revealed, therefore, the coding strategy

was of a different kind. Firstly, it was necessary to build a chronology of Beethoven's first years until his young adulthood, despite the limited information about his infancy and childhood. Secondly, helped once more by markers of psychological salience, four categories were decided upon to analyze his attachment style and emotional regulation strategies. These were: 1. Emotional regulation strategies about his deafness. 2. Attachment style through suffering and virtue. 3. Relationships with women and 4. The relationship with his nephew, Karl.

When considering level III, the Narrative identity theory (McAdams, 1993) served as an orientation. By going over Beethoven's life once again and taking into consideration some specific nuclear episodes, as well as after an inquiry to the author of the theory, the analysis searched for: 1. Theme settings, 2. The main selves or images, 3. The narrative tone; to try to find a coherent script or plot of his narrative identity, and 4. The metaphors of his story.

Regarding the expert panel that, as mentioned before, was a complementary tool to this method with the goal of generating data, the content from each interview was analyzed and the main common data was extracted to be used along with the outcomes of the research. The principal themes were: 1. The relation between Beethoven's life and his musical work, 2. Beethoven's capacity for and attitude towards work, 3. Characteristics of Beethoven's music, 4. Beethoven: genius, artist or artisan, and 5. Parental education and the image of women.

*Steps 8 and 9 - Select display formats (use multiple formats if possible) and integrate coding with display*

A decision must be taken regarding the way in which the raw data will be best displayed for analysis and how the psychologically relevant information will be presented. There seem to be two main ways, either as a chronology or as only the salient themes (du Plessis, 2017).

The data of Beethoven's psychobiography was displayed and classified according to the categories previously chosen, based on the selected psychological theories and salient significant information, however always in chronological order, constantly aware, therefore, of his life course. This decision clearly contributed to facilitate further analysis.

For these analyses, the main display format was a table. The categories were organized in columns; inside each, the different content from the sources

was written or copied. Since the information was very great, it required many ways to encompass it all and different tables were designed. Sometimes, the first ones were even handmade until getting to the final most accurate formats. During this process, special care was taken not to forget or ignore any category, or any relevant information previously observed.

*Step 10 - Write the psychobiography*

The writing process should only begin once a substantial amount of groundwork has been done (du Plessis (2017). It is important to bear in mind that the process of doing a psychobiography is often more circular than a straight-forward sequence, as it often requires revisiting, reviewing or even adding data. To illustrate this, throughout the analysis of level II, first, it seemed appropriate to classify data according to the main aspects described in the theory, however after halfway done and by going over the sources again broader categories were created since we found relevant patterns and significant areas of Beethoven's life. This led to a better understanding of his attachment style and ways of dealing with adversity.

While the writing of a psychobiography is a significant step that requires rigor along with creativity, the quality of the research will depend on the quality of the previous steps, especially those related to the data collection, manipulation, and analysis as well as the scientific rigor and support of the selected theoretical models (du Plessis, 2017; Schultz, 2014).

In the present project, all steps were carefully taken and supervised by other researchers. Experts on Beethoven from the main international research centers, as explained before, made an essential contribution to the selection of the most reliable sources. Also, an international expert panel was incorporated which contributed to the objectivity of the investigation; and various national and international researchers on psychology, qualitative methodology and psychobiography guided, supported, and supervised the entire process. Moreover, the model by McAdams (1995), as well as the three concrete theories that were applied during the analysis of Beethoven's personality are well-supported and commonly used in current studies.

*Step 11 - Revision of psychobiography in relation to specific questions developed previously*

As this step refers to the importance of ensuring that the psychobiography is internally consistent, the questions posed early in the research process were

revisited. Those were the main traits of Beethoven, attachment style and his identity narrative; and it was confirmed that all of them were addressed.

As du Plessis (2017) explains, it is recommended for the researcher to reflect on their specific feelings regarding the psychobiographical subject and investigate whether those feelings played a role in the way in which the conclusions were drawn. In that regard, during the process of this work the main researcher had conversations and discussions with the supervisors and other colleagues to keep as neutral as possible a perspective of the subject since the researcher was aware of her great admiration for Beethoven; that way, a biased interpretation and conclusions were avoided.

*Step 12 - Evaluation of the process*

As with any other research, revision of the quality of the entire process is mandatory to offer good work to the scientific community. It is especially important to make sure that every step is explained in detail.

The final document of the research on Beethoven presented the what, the why and the how of each step, to make sure of the quality of the psychobiography and to help other researchers understand very well the method in case they are interested in replicating or discussing it.

To guarantee a good evaluation of the psychobiography, several authors' advice was considered, among them Elms (2005), Runyan (2005) and Shultz (2005a, 2005b).

## Conclusions

The article has demonstrated throughout these pages, how a systematic method for writing a psychobiography adds reliability to the study of an individual. The method suggested by du Plessis (2017) has proven to be rigorous and well-structured. For the study of Beethoven, it served as an appropriate guide and was especially supportive for overwhelming moments and decisions. Moreover, it shows awareness of the importance of being creative and flexible enough to adjust the subject's particularities. In that sense, it contemplates the back and forth of this type of research, an experience we faced on several occasions. In a similar manner, during the process of writing this Beethoven's psychobiography, a decision was made to include an expert panel as a tool to

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generate data. That contributed to enrich the results, add solidity to the study and keep objectivity in the researcher.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, psychobiography as a qualitative research practice, offers several benefits to personality psychology. In Beethoven's case, it allowed an integrated picture of the character, beyond the artist, a better comprehension of the influence of his time on his way of being and decisions, helped confirm the usefulness and efficacy of the three levels of personality model (McAdams, 1995), as it contemplated both personality and psychological development, as well as the quality of the three specific personality theories chosen to answer the concrete questions formulated. Therefore, they helped decipher the composer's main traits, attachment style and coping strategies along with his own narrative identity, that is, the way he understood and described himself to himself and to others. As expected, this work contributed to the researcher's personal and professional improvement and growth.

Although there have been other documents, papers and books that have mentioned a few aspects of the Beethoven's personality, sometimes especially focused on searching for psychopathology, this current research has allowed for the first time to look carefully and systematically at the psychology of Beethoven and relied on widely accepted psychological theories.

With the pages above we hope we have offered an example for those who feel a high interest in writing a psychobiography and needed for an example with enough detail of how to carry it out step by step. This reference aims to complement previous documents focused on other aspects of the psychobiography.

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