

Task Force Report 11

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The Psychiatrist as Psychohistorian



American Psychiatric Association

Task Force Reports

This is the eleventh report in a monograph series authorized by the Board of Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association to give wider dissemination to the findings of the Association's many commissions, committees, and task forces that are called upon from time to time to evaluate the state of the art in a problem area of current concern to the profession, to related disciplines, and to the public.

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Robert W. Gibson, M.D.
President, APA, 1976-1977

THE PSYCHIATRIST AS PSYCHOHISTORIAN

Report of the Task Force on Psychohistory of the American Psychiatric Association

Charles K. Hofling, M.D., Chairperson

John E. Mack, M.D.

Chester Pierce, M.D.

Kent E. Robinson, M.D.

W. Donald Ross, M.D.

Barry Smolev, M.D.

John Bouma, M.D. (Consultant)

Walter C. Langsam, Ph.D. (Consultant)

Bruce Mazlish, Ph.D. (Consultant)

Approved for Publication by the Council on
Emerging Issues (1975-1976)

Jerry M. Lewis, M.D., Chairperson

Perry Ottenberg, M.D., Vice-Chairperson

Edward T. Auer, M.D.

Col. Clothilde D. Bowen, M.D.

Carola Eisenberg, M.D.

M. L. Zaphiropoulos, M.D., Liaison, Assembly

Dewitt Alfred, M.D., Observer-Consultant

Robert L. Robinson, M.D., Staff Liaison

AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION
1700 Eighteenth Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009

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I

THE AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION AND PSYCHOHISTORY: THE PSYCHOHISTORY TASK-FORCE AND ITS CHARGE

The formal interest of the American Psychiatric Association in the subject of psychohistory, as distinguished from an interest in the subject on the part of many individual members, can, in a broad sense, be dated from the later summer and early fall of 1964. At that time, as many readers will recall, *FACT Magazine* sent a "questionnaire" with a single, loaded question to most of the members of the Association. The question was: "Do you believe that Barry Goldwater is psychologically fit to be President of the United States?" Most of the psychiatrists thus solicited did not, of course, attempt to answer the question, and a fair number wrote letters of protest to the publication, sending copies to the Association. On August 3, Dr. Walter Barton, then Medical Director of the Association, wrote to the Managing Editor of *FACT Magazine*, as follows:

Many members of the Association have, with justifiable indignation, called our attention to a questionnaire you have sent them asking whether they 'think Barry Goldwater psychologically fit to serve as President of the United States.'

A physician renders an opinion on the psychological fitness or mental condition of anyone in the traditional (and confidential) doctor-patient relationship in which findings are based upon a thorough clinical examination.

Being aware of this, should you decide to publish the results of a purported 'survey' of psychiatric opinion on the question you have posed, this Association will take all possible measures to disavow its validity.

No acknowledgement of Dr. Barton's letter was received, and the magazine did proceed to publish the results of its "survey." On October 1, therefore, Dr. Daniel Blain, then President of the American Psychiatric Association, released to the press a statement, of which the following paragraphs are excerpts.

Members of the American Psychiatric Association are indignant that *FACT Magazine* has published what purports to be an assessment of professional psychiatric opinion regarding the

psychological fitness of Mr. Goldwater to be President of the United States.

FACT has done no such thing. It has, instead, published a hodgepodge of the personal political opinions of selected psychiatrists speaking as individuals. By attaching the stigma of extreme political partisanship to the psychiatric profession as a whole in the heated climate of the current political campaign, *FACT* has, in effect, administered a low blow to all who would work to advance the treatment and care of the mentally ill of America.

Psychiatry as a science is politically non-partisan, whatever may be the political opinions of its individual members. Psychiatry seeks to enlist the support of all citizens without regard to political preference in behalf of the struggle against mental illness in our country. The publication of *FACT*'s article is subversive of that effort. It is our faith that those who read this article, or otherwise learn of it, will readily perceive the misleading nature of its claims. To every extent possible, the American Psychiatric Association will cooperate with such agencies as the Democratic and Republican National Committees and with the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, and others, in exposing the mischief that has been set afoot. . . .

Obviously, the American Psychiatric Association has no objection to honestly conducted political opinion surveys of its members. What it does object to is the viciousness of *FACT*'s design to elicit an "expert" opinion on a technical question (Is Mr. Goldwater "psychologically" fit?). To the great embarrassment of our association some psychiatrists unwittingly replied to the question *in their capacity as psychiatrists*.

What can be said of their responses? . . . *the replies to the question have no scientific or medical validity whatsoever.*

Although the American Psychiatric Association has taken no official action with respect to the activities of psychiatrists in the general area of psychohistory-psychobiography-psychiatric profiling—apart from the vigorous response to the *FACT Magazine* travesty—events of the ensuing twelve years have made it appropriate to mount a professional inquiry into certain problems arising therewith. There was, for example, the publication of the Freud-Bullitt book, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*,⁹ a work not without interest but widely condemned, both by psychiatrists and historians, for its obvious bias, its psychological reductionism, and its failure to give due weight to historical and social factors which had a significant

bearing on the subject. A thornier, more complex, and, in some respects, more disquieting problem has arisen in connection with the recent spate of publications purporting to apply the principles and theoretical constructs of dynamic psychiatry (principally psychoanalytic) to the study of living or very recently deceased persons of wide and usually political significance. A similar problem has arisen with respect to studies of currently existing, politically significant groups.

Many such works have, of course, been written by journalists or by scholars who are not psychiatrists and thus do not come within the jurisdiction of the American Psychiatric Association. They are nevertheless of some concern to it, since they do tend to affect the psychiatric image. Among such recent works—of widely varying scholarly merit—are Gary Wills' *Nixon Agonistes*,²¹ Nancy Gager Clinch's *The Kennedy Neurosis*,³ Robert Jay Lifton's *Home From the War*,¹⁷ Meyer Zeligs' *Friendship and Fratricide*,²² Bruce Mazlish's *In Search of Nixon*,¹⁸ and Eli Chesen's *President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile*.² An equally difficult, closely related problem with, perhaps, even more elusive features, is that involving the production by psychiatrists and other behavioral scientists of psychiatric profiles which are not published but are sponsored by and put at the disposal of various governmental (and sometimes private) agencies.

It should certainly be noted that various other psychohistorical works have appeared during recent years, which, while productive of legitimate scholarly criticism, have been generally regarded as masterpieces in the field and have not raised issues of ethics or propriety. Perhaps the most obvious example here is Erik Erikson's *Ghandi's Truth*,⁶ as was his *Young Man Luther*⁷ at an earlier date. This is to say that the increased interest of the American Psychiatric Association in matters pertaining to the field of psychohistory, broadly considered, is by no means merely defensive or cautious. Formal psychohistory is a legitimate new field of scholarly endeavor, closely related to psychiatry, which has already given indications that it can be of high value.

The American Psychiatric Association's Task Force on Psychohistory is subordinate to its Council on Emerging Issues and arose as a result of discussions in the Council. The charge given the Task Force was two-fold: (1) to arrive at proposals (particularly for psychiatrists) with respect to ethical guide-lines for the writing of psychohistorical studies (including psychobiographies and psychiatric profiling), and (2) to arrive at proposals for scholarly guide-lines in this area.

II

HISTORY AND PSYCHOHISTORY

Plutarch related certain aspects of Themistocles' ambitious strivings to his awareness of his mother's not having been of pure Athenian blood. Herodotus was immensely interested in what would now be called social psychology. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine plumbed his own psychology to considerable depths. It is clearly an old idea that the history of individuals and groups cannot be thoroughly understood without some insight into such psychological matters as motives, conflicts, and character.

That aspect of psychohistory now called "profiling" has been still more widely practiced and is of a still greater antiquity. It is, for example, well-known that Cleopatra sought to be informed of the psychological vulnerabilities of her adversaries, and we are shown in *II Samuel* how Saul sought to find a psychological weak spot in young David.

With this being the case, it is yet true that psychohistory has become more conspicuous, and psychohistorians more ambitious, in recent times than ever before. This circumstance is in keeping with the great increase in psychological-mindedness of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. It appears, however, to be more particularly the result of one specific aspect of that increase, namely, the advent of psychoanalysis, with its demonstrated ability to shed light upon pre-conscious and unconscious elements in mental life. A far more elaborate, more internally consistent, and more nearly complete motivational psychology has been worked out in the Twentieth Century than has ever before been available. Given the right circumstances, a psychoanalytically-trained psychiatrist (or other professional in human behavior) can come to a rather reliable estimate of the principal motivational forces, the more significant personal conflicts, and the basic psychological adaptive measures of his subject. He may, in fact, at times be able to do this considerably in advance of the subject's own conscious knowledge of them.

The "right" circumstances, i.e., the circumstances which most favor the achievement of conclusions with some claim to scientific validity can be briefly stated. In essence, they involve a relatively sustained, confidential, professional relationship between the subject

(ordinarily a patient) and a participating observer (ordinarily a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, or clinical psychologist), a relationship in which the subject gradually becomes capable of speaking with extreme candor, of relaxing some of his psychological defenses, and of experiencing, within the framework of the therapeutic sessions, a special kind of regressive relationship to the observer called transference.

One knows that in such situations that the psychoanalyst is hampered in his efforts to obtain a penetrating, objective view of the other party to the relationship by certain quirks and biases of his own, including not only his residual personal conflicts but *his value-system, including his ideology*. Given the therapist's requisite integrity, this difficulty is, of course, moderated by the continuing presence of the patient. If the therapist offers an interpretation to the patient of the basic significance of some of the latter's thoughts, sensations, emotions, or behavior, the patient's reaction to the interpretation eventually gives, as a rule, rather strong evidence as to both its degree of correctness and its degree of importance. The validity of the interpretation is typically indicated by its exerting a significant and predictable effect on the patient's behavior. Most typically, it is a releasing effect, one through which the patient gains in self-knowledge and, in time, in the ability to regulate his behavior more realistically. The production of such an effect tends to confirm the correctness of the interpretation, and the magnitude of the effect indicates the importance of the interpretation.

Even though he is well trained in dynamic psychiatry, the psychohistorian is clearly confronted with difficulties not encountered by the traditional historian whose more limited approach to the psychological understanding of his subjects is largely confined to their conscious features. For one thing, the psychohistorian does not examine the persons with whom he is dealing in the sense that the psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist examines his patients—i.e. he does not observe and interact with the subjects in the psychotherapeutic framework of the special, sustained relationship described above. Secondly, the psychohistorian lacks the immense advantage of being able to test the correctness and importance of his interpretations, by observing his subject's reaction to them, both immediate and delayed. Thus, the psychohistorian, unless he takes extensive precautions, is far more likely than the psychoanalyst or psychotherapist, to let his biases influence his interpretations.

On the other hand, the psychohistorian well trained in historiography has advantages over the psychoanalyst or psychotherapist

in being able to obtain a comprehensive view of his subjects. For example, if he is writing a biography, his data are by no means confined to material emanating from his subject such as diaries, letters, legal documents, published writings, etc.; nor, if he is writing a general history, is he confined to data emanating from those individuals who comprise his principal cast of characters or the groups that play major roles in his total story. Being concerned with a broad, complex, and integrated presentation, he is aware of and prepared to make use of information from others or what the psychiatrist would call "outside sources." By contrast the psychiatrist, and particularly the psychoanalyst, whose focus is on "psychic reality," may not avail himself of information obtained from others, a limitation which is not necessarily significant for psychotherapeutic purposes but which would be a deficiency with respect to presenting a comprehensive account of an individual subject in his world.

The psychohistorian, when he writes of the past, has a second advantage. On the one hand, this circumstance favors—although it certainly does not guarantee—a scholarly detachment, and, on the other, it means, so to speak, that all the returns are in. That is to say, the nature and significance of certain human interactions can be best judged by their effects, and to the historian, including the psychohistorian, a great many of these effects are known or, at least, ascertainable. For the psychoanalyst or psychotherapist, many of the effects of his patient's interaction with other persons and groups lie, to a degree, in the future; it is a matter of weighing probabilities in this area; the outcome cannot be known.

III

SOME WORKING DEFINITIONS

Psychohistory is that branch of history which places special emphasis on the psychology of the individuals and groups under consideration, as this psychology develops and interacts with the environment, with particular attention typically being given to problems of motivation, psychic conflict, and adaptation, in both their conscious and unconscious aspects.

Psychobiography is a subdivision of psychohistory (either standing alone or forming one element of a more comprehensive psychohistorical work) which treats the life of an individual according to psychohistorical principles. The more the subject of a psychobiography is perceived as a part of a psychosocial matrix including other significant figures and other forces operative in his milieu, the more such a work comes to resemble a work of general psychohistory. (Erickson's *Young Man Luther*,⁷ for example, is by no means just a study of the man, but a study of the man in his world.)

Psychiatric profiling is perhaps better described than defined. Usually undertaken from practical rather than from scholarly considerations, it bears a relationship to psychohistory which is rather analogous to that borne by the clinical and dynamic diagnoses of a patient to a thorough formulation including a psychogenetic diagnosis. The psychiatric profile typically concerns itself with a cross-sectional, rather than a three-dimensional, portrayal; i.e., with an analysis of the kind of person the subject is and with the probable nature of his behavior under various contingencies, rather than with an analysis of how he came to be what he is. The more a psychiatric profile takes into consideration the developmental features, the more it comes to resemble psychobiography, and, indeed, there is a considerable overlapping in the usage of the two designations.

IV

ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN WRITING PSYCHOHISTORY

The problems considered in this section are those involving a broad spectrum of ethical issues, ranging from questions of propriety, on the one hand, to those of legality, on the other. These issues are over and above the ethical considerations which are a part of the estimation of any work of psychohistory seen purely as a scholarly and scientific endeavor. The latter issues will be considered in a separate section.

The situation is a complex one because of the many variables involved and a delicate one because it appears necessary to steer a narrow course between the Scylla of advocating a stultifying limitation of legitimate scholarly and professional effort and the Charybdis of acquiescing in needless distress or even harm to various individuals and groups directly affected by psychohistorical studies.

An idea of some of the more significant variables can be conveyed through consideration of the following questions.

Is the study for publication, for private use, or for governmental use?

Is the subject an individual or a group (family, organization, institution, or nation)?

If an individual, is he still alive? If a group, is it still in existence and actively functioning as such?

Is the study to be based (in part) upon interviews with the subject or subjects?

Is the study to be made with the informed consent of the individual or group?

Is the author of the study a psychiatrist, a historian, or a journalist?

Essentially all of the great examples of modern psychohistory, it should be noted, were written about subjects who were no longer living. Some of the more prominent of these works include Freud's *Leonardo Da Vinci*,¹⁰ *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical*

Account of a Case of Paranoia,¹¹ and (with Bullitt) *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: a Psychological Study*,⁹ as well as his effort at what could be called "psycho-pre-history," *Moses and Monotheism*.¹² They also include such works as Bonaparte's *Edgar Allan Poe*,¹ Eissler's *Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study*,⁵ Erikson's *Childhood and Society*,⁸ *Young Man Luther*,⁷ and *Ghandi's Truth*,⁶ Greenacre's *Swift and Carroll*,¹³ and Hitschmann's *Great Men: Psychoanalytic Studies*.¹⁴ With the exception of *Ghandi's Truth*, all of these works were written and published prior to 1960.

With a very few exceptions, none of which apply to the works cited above, ethical considerations (aside from those pertaining to scholarship in general) do not appear to be of grave weight with respect to studies of subjects no longer living or active. Ethical considerations do, however, assume considerable weight, when, as has increasingly been the case, the psychohistorical (including psychobiographic and profiling) effort is directed to the elucidation of an individual or group currently alive or active. They assume additional weight when the individual or group is a fellow-citizen or a functioning component of the same nation as the writer.* They are gravest of all when the psychohistorian is a psychiatrist and physician.

The crux of the matter lies in two related facts: (1) By reason of his special perceptive and deductive skills and his special knowledge of depth-psychology, the psychiatrist as psychohistorian is often in a position to discern certain things about the subject's mind and behavior *that are not discernible to the subject himself or to those observers lacking the special training and knowledge*. (2) By reason of his special status as a physician, a psychiatrist, and a scientist, the author is, to a considerable extent, accepted by a large segment of society as having special powers, and his report is therefore likely to be taken very seriously, often as having even greater authority than he claims for it. In a case in which the psychiatrist had reasonably ample data—let us say, interviews with the subject, interviews with persons on familiar terms with the subject at various periods of his life, access to some of the subject's personal correspondence, and, of course, knowledge of all of the subject's speeches, writings, and behavior in the public domain—his psychohistorical analysis of the subject would, at least in theory, be analogous to clinically deductive reports of X-ray films of the patient's body. The analogy would be weaker with fewer psychological data, but, in most instances, it would hold to some extent.

*The special case in which a psychohistorical study is made, not for publication, but for a governmental agency, is discussed on pp. 12 and 13 of this section.

If he had obtained the informed consent of his subject to make and publish his analysis, the psychiatrist-psychohistorian would, in most instances, encounter no ethical problems which could not be solved by the application of good taste and common-sense. An example of just the conditions described is Meyer Zelig's analysis of Alger Hiss in his psychohistorical work, *Friendship and Fratricide*.²² But suppose that the subject, unlike Hiss, were currently in a significant and sensitive government position—for example, a Secretary of State. Common-sense ethical considerations would then have to take into account such possibilities as that a psychological vulnerability, hitherto unrecognized by the subject and perhaps not within his ability to modify voluntarily, would, if discovered and mentioned in the published analysis, place the subject, and therefore the Nation, at a disadvantage in negotiating with foreign powers. Surely the common-sense ethical response of the psychohistorian, in such an instance, would be not to use this portion of the analysis for publication at that time. (See p. 11.)

Unfortunately for the scope of psychohistorical efforts, however, it would seldom be the case that a significant public figure, even if currently not in an official position, would give consent to the publication of a searching psychohistorical inquiry. (As Chambers did not, with respect to *Friendship and Fratricide*.) If the subject were currently in an official position, the likelihood of his giving consent would be even smaller. It is not merely that he might fear bias in the psychohistorian but that he would experience a perfectly natural reluctance to having his intimate, personal conflicts and psychological defenses identified (or misidentified) and speculated upon in public view. He would regard this published analysis as an invasion of privacy, and so would many fellow-citizens.

If it were merely a question of the propriety of offering a clinical diagnosis or a formal psychiatric opinion as to "fitness" or "competence," as in the Goldwater fiasco, the problem would be far simpler. The original position of the American Psychiatric Association would cover the situation. Clearly a psychiatrist should not publish such a diagnostic statement or flat professional opinion without having examined the subject and having obtained the subject's written, informed consent.

The question has, more significantly, to do with the propriety of a psychiatrist's publishing a psychohistorical study which includes a *dynamic formulation* of his living subject or subjects under conditions which typically exclude (a) psychiatric interviews and (b) informed consent. Under such circumstances, it seems immediately

clear that the writer should confine himself, in data gathering, to the use of material in the public domain plus that obtainable from interviews with persons knowing the subject, freely and informedly given. That is to say, he should refrain from attempting to obtain data, such as private letters and diaries, which are legally the property of the subject.

Should he, however, proceed at all under such circumstances? It should at once be realized that a number of behavioral scientists—including, however, very few psychiatrists—have expressed the opinion that it is not merely ethically acceptable but ethically desirable for psychohistorians to do just this. (For a vigorous, if somewhat fanciful, statement of this position, see DeMause.⁴) The principal line of argument runs thus: Our (especially American) society needs all the help it can get. If scientific means are available by which the workings of the minds of our significant public figures, and, more particularly, their immaturities, vulnerabilities, and limitations, can be discerned, deduced, analyzed and exposed to public view, this course should be taken. If public opinion is thereby swayed, with political action resulting, so much the better. The public good is bound to outweigh whatever private harm may ensue. This is evidently the philosophy of much journalism and of some rather pretentious books such as *The Kennedy Neurosis*, and *President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile*.² Minus the trimmings, it is the philosophy of much soap box oratory and the philosophy once publicly advocated by John Erlichman, when he said, in effect, that he considered it the duty of a public spirited citizen to uncover and publicize the weaknesses and character flaws of his political foes.

Obviously, the argument is not entirely devoid of cogency. But there are disturbing and possibly fatal flaws in it, especially for psychiatrists or psychoanalysts turned psychohistorians.

In the historian, turned psychohistorian, who accepts the argument, one cannot but sense a certain naivete in dubbing as "scientific" an effort to rise above his personal values and political biases to achieve objectivity. Such books as *The Kennedy Neurosis*, *Friendship and Fratricide*, and *President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile* surely attest to the inadequacies of this "science." Nor, we suspect, can such efforts be demonstrated to serve the public interest. Indeed, one could hypothesize that in some instances they may damage the public interest.

For the psychiatrist turned psychohistorian, however, the fallacies of the argument are far more pointed because of his traditional and well tested commitment to the welfare of the individual (*primum*

non nocere) as opposed to the very considerable likelihood that a psychohistory may indeed, do harm to the private individual. Also, manifestly, the psychiatrist can scarcely avoid public identification of the expertise and authority of his profession with the psychohistories that he may author.

Thus, the basic question of whether the psychiatrist should write and publish psychohistories or psychobiographies of living persons based on materials that do not emanate from a clinical setting and do not have the informed consent of the subjects is a complex one and, indeed, may not be answerable in a categorical way.

Clearly the contribution of psychodynamic insights to the interpretation of history and biography enhances the knowledge of mankind, and one would not wish to discourage this new field of scholarly endeavor.

The production of a psychohistory resembles in many respects the undertaking of a research project and this quickly leads one again to consider the problem of informed consent. The Codes of Ethics of both the American Psychiatric and the American Psychological Associations state that experimentation upon human subjects, however harmless, should not be undertaken without informed consent. To be sure, psychohistory, psychobiography, and psychoprofiling do not entail experimentation in the ordinary sense, as does, for example, psychopharmacological research. Still they are a form of research; they do entail an invasion of privacy, and inherent in the effort is the possibility of doing harm to the private individual subject. (There is also, of course, the possibility of doing him good, but this is not relevant to this discussion.)

In considering the ethical aspects of the basic question, various types of psychobiography, psychohistory, and psychoprofiling must be taken into account.

For example, it is difficult to conclude that there is anything improper or unethical (even if written by a psychiatrist) about a study such as that done by historian Walter Langer in World War II for the Office of Strategic Services and since published under the title *The Mind of Adolf Hitler*.¹⁵ The study was utilized during World War II by high government officials in the U.S. and allied governments. Nor does it seem one could object on any ethical grounds to producing for the confidential use of government officials psychobiographies or profiles of significant international figures whose personality formation needs to be understood to carry out national policy more effectively.

The danger, of course, is that confidential or secret documents

are subject to leakage, and while this does not seem particularly significant in relation to a Hitler or a Stalin or, in general, to extranationals who impinge on the national interest, it does become a "high risk" factor in terms of profiling national leaders, especially if they are alive or just recently deceased with numerous relatives and friends presently living. But assuming that the secrecy of documents can be guaranteed, then obviously the weight of public and professional opinion cannot be brought to bear upon the authors. Moreover, this type of activity blends by almost imperceptible degrees into common practices of educational institutions, businesses, charitable organizations, and so on, many of which compile basically harmless files or "dossiers" on the tastes, likes and dislikes, biases, and eccentricities of key individuals with whom they must deal.

Thus the Task Force concludes that it is not necessarily unethical for a psychiatrist to produce confidential profiles of individuals in the service of the national interest, and there are even occasions when such profiles may be appropriately published. An example of the latter would be to produce a profile of a criminal at large (e.g. the "Boston Strangler") on the basis of such data as might be available from law enforcement agencies and the media about the criminal's behavior. Wide publicity about such an individual might be helpful in apprehending him. But again the Task Force would caution all members of the profession about the risks involved in profiling living persons, and most especially fellow citizens, even when confidentiality seems assured.

As to the basic question of whether it is ethical for a psychiatrist to write and publish a psychohistory, psychobiography, or psychoprofile of a living person, it is difficult for the Task Force to perceive how this could be done ethically without the written, informed, and freely given consent of the subject or subjects for personal interviews and publication. By informed consent we mean full disclosure to the subject or subjects of the way in which the material is to be used and published.

In the case of recently deceased persons, in which there is definite possibility of harm to living relatives and friends, the situation is less clear-cut. But here again the Task Force leans to the view that if such subjects are to be dealt with, informed consent should at least be sought from living next-of-kin and, if it is withheld, this fact should be stated, together with the author's reasons for going ahead without it.

Certainly, there can be no question about the ethics of publishing psychohistorical studies or biographies of deceased persons when

there is no problem about invading the privacy of surviving relatives though this fact must be meticulously determined.

In sum, the Task Force urges upon the Association that it use whatever means are available to it to inform its membership of the risks inherent in this new field of scholarly endeavor; that it vigorously discourage irresponsible psychoprofiling in the public prints such as in the "Goldwater Affair" of 1964, and finally that it call upon the Association's Ethics Committee to study this report and consider whether the Association should add provisions to its Code of Ethics concerning these matters.

V

SOME QUESTIONS OF SCHOLARSHIP IN PSYCHOHISTORY

As indicated in its title, this section does not purport to be a comprehensive discussion of scholarly issues in the writing of psychohistory, but merely to indicate a number of the more troublesome questions, and, in some instances, to suggest what appear to be promising approaches to them.

There is, first of all, the matter of the training of the psychohistorian. It is certainly understandable, in view of the arduous nature of the disciplines, that there have thus far been very few writers of psychohistory who have been thoroughly trained in both historiography and psychoanalysis or dynamic psychiatry. In view of the fact that the historian has remained less specialized than the psychoanalyst or psychiatrist, it is also understandable that, at least until very recently, it has been far more common for a psychiatrist-psychoanalyst to attempt the writing of psychohistory than for a historian to do so. (As an illustration of this circumstance, it may be noted that all of the psychohistorical works mentioned in the section on ethics were written by psychoanalysts, most of whom were also psychiatrists.) The psychiatrist-psychoanalyst has usually been untrained (or self-trained) in historiography, a circumstance which has led to many errors. These cannot be detailed here, but it should perhaps be mentioned that the commonest seems to be a naivete with respect to source material, with frequent reliance upon secondary or even tertiary sources instead of primary sources, resulting in an inadequate perception and presentation of the socio-cultural matrix in which the subjects functioned. A well-known example is afforded by Freud's mistakes, in his study of Leonardo, of accepting it as a given fact that Leonardo had an early memory of a vulture, when it was, in fact, of a kite, and of his attaching special and personal significance to certain features of Leonardo's paintings which are, in all probability, the result of a mere acquiescence in conventional modes of representation. This error—inadequate attention to primary sources, and, more especially, to primary sources other than the material emanating from the subject or subjects—is one to which the psychiatrist is especially prone, not merely because of insufficient training in historiography,

but because, in his own discipline, he has learned to place very heavy emphasis upon "psychic reality," with some consequent neglect of "external" or "objective" reality.

The historian, when functioning as a psychohistorian, has typically worked under comparable—although, of course, different—limitations in education and training. His knowledge of dynamic psychiatry has, for the most part, been rather informal. He is likely to be well-read in psychoanalytic theory; he may have taken some courses at an analytic institute or a university, and he may have experienced analytically-oriented psychotherapy or analysis as a patient. Typically, however, he has not performed psychotherapy, and inevitably he has not borne the full clinical responsibility for the treatment of patients. These quite natural limitations of experience are likely to have several consequences for his scholarship, but one of these should be singled out for special mention. In a word, the "armchair analyst," be he historian, literary critic, or art critic, finds it difficult to deal with the problems presented by motivational overdetermination. Not having had the experience of repeatedly testing the weight of co-existing (not necessarily conflicting) psychodynamic speculations in the clinical setting, he has developed less ability to discriminate between sequences likely to have the more significant influence and those likely to have the less in a given set of circumstances. This situation tends, at times, to make for "wild analysis," i.e., for a choice of speculations which may be the more colorful or intriguing—and which may, in fact, correspond to dynamic sequences existing within the subject—but which are eclipsed in behavioral significance by other speculatable sequences of a more prosaic nature. A slightly different, but closely related point is that there is some temptation for the "armchair analyst," when faced with a choice of interpretations of his subject's behavior, regularly to select the "deeper" one, i.e., the one deriving from the more archaic elements in the subject's mental life, forgetting that "deeper" is not necessarily equivalent to "more decisive."

It is clear that what would, perhaps, be the ideal solution for limitations of the sort mentioned in the above paragraphs, namely, that the psychohistorian have extensive, formal training in historiography and both psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychiatry. The nearest approach to it has come in recent years through the policy of a number of psychoanalytic institutes to offer didactic analyses and extensive formal training in psychoanalytic theory to historians (as well as to literary and art critics and others in the arts and humanities) for the purpose of increasing their capabilities in their own

fields. Moreover, certain medical college departments of psychiatry offer fellowships to scholars in non-medical fields which include not only didactic training in psychiatric theory but considerable exposure to psychiatrists in their work. In neither case, however, does such training ordinarily involve clinical experience. Analogously, it is becoming more common for psychiatrists and psychoanalysts interested in psychohistorical work to seek formal education in historiography, although such efforts seldom involve the taking of a graduate degree in the field. In the face of these limitations, the obvious remedy is extensive collaboration between the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst and the historiographer. While consultation of one with the other has become common, it usually stops short of collaboration. Less common, but often of high value for the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, would be consultation with such colleagues as anthropologists and sociologists.

A subtler problem in scholarship for the psychiatrist attempting to write psychohistory is that alluded to previously in the section on History and Psychohistory, namely that of "countertransference" or other bias. When one considers the immense amount of effort involved in the production of a major psychohistorical work, it seems perfectly natural that an author is unlikely to undertake such a work unless he is, so to speak, sustained by motives other than (and in addition to) mere investigative curiosity. To take a relatively non-controversial example, it seems clear that Freud's choice of Leonardo as a subject—in the face of a severe lack of data—was largely determined by quite personal motives, of which one of the more obvious was his wish to demonstrate further the extreme importance of a subject's infantile sexual life. Another example is furnished by the Freud-Bullitt Wilson,⁹ in which the authors' (particularly Bullitt's) resentment of Wilson and need to denigrate him has been widely remarked. To Freud's credit, in this effort, his bias is very frankly stated in the introduction. (Wilson "was from the beginning unsympathetic to me.") Unfortunately, in many later psychohistorical works, the biases, while quite detectable, are often disavowed, and, one assumes, have gone unrecognized by the authors. It seems very likely, for example, that the widespread existence of a certain political or ideological bias among psychiatrists was correctly identified by the editors of *FACT Magazine*, in the Goldwater episode.

It seems naturally to be the case that, the closer the subject—be it an individual or a group—is to the contemporary scene, the likelier is the existence of an ideological bias in the author. It is, for example, usually still detectable in writers on the Civil War period; more so

in writers on the Second World War period, and still more so in writers on figures and events of the present and very recent past.

The corrective measure, in this case, although seemingly obvious, is seldom resorted to. It is analogous to that utilized in the case of limitations arising from one's professional identity. Just as it is of high value for the psychiatrist to consult or collaborate with the historiographer, and *vice versa*, so here it would be of high value for the psychohistorian, of whatever primary discipline, *to consult with other psychohistorians holding differing ideologies*. Sometimes the difficulty is partially handled by reviewers (cf. van den Haag's article, "Psychoanalysis and Fantasy,"²⁰ written in review of Zelig's *Friendship and Fratricide*,²² or Lehmann-Haupt's article, "Presumptuous Psychiatry"¹⁸ in review of Lifton's *Home From the War*¹⁷), but such correctives tend toward polemics, and the thesis and antithesis are of less scholarly value than would be a carefully reasoned synthesis written by an author after consultations with colleagues of differing ideological stance.

A quite separate problem in psychohistory, that of estimating the validity of psychohistorical studies, arises against the background question of whether or not psychohistory is, in some measure, a scientific undertaking. Differing opinions are tenable, but they seem, for the most part, to fall within a spectrum not unlimited in scope. Perhaps a median position would be that, whereas history, in general, is a distinct discipline, having its own traditions and methodology, and being, on the whole, rather more an art than a science, yet psychohistory, drawing heavily upon psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and other behavioral sciences, does have some claim to being a scientific endeavor. If this is granted, the question then arises as to what criteria are available by which the degree of scientific validity of a given work of psychohistory may be judged.

It has been maintained that the foremost criterion by which scientific hypotheses are measured, i.e., value with respect to prediction, is inapplicable to psychohistory. Strictly speaking, however, this is not the case. Even in writing of a figure or group of the past, there is always the possibility that new data will be discovered and will become known to the writer against which one or more of his deductions can be checked. An example is afforded by Ella Sharpe's essay, "From *King Lear* to *The Tempest*."¹⁹ Although a serious student of Shakespeare's writings, Sharpe was, at the time of writing the first draft of the essay, unacquainted with certain details of Shakespeare's personal life. From the characterization of Lear and the picture of his relationships with Goneril and Regan, Sharpe deduced that Shake-

spare had had two younger siblings, one born when he was about two years of age and one when he was about five. These influences were confirmed when Sharpe turned to E. K. Chambers' biographical study (then newly published).

In writing of a contemporary figure, the possibility of the appearance or discovery of fresh data, either confirmatory or destructive of a psychodynamic speculation, is, of course, far greater. As an example, one may note that, in his *In Search of Nixon*,¹⁸ Mazlish correctly predicted (and offered a plausible explanation of) Nixon's very frequent use of certain types of censorable expressions in private speech several years before the "expletive deleted" phenomenon.

What is perhaps most important about these two examples is the following. Both Sharpe and Mazlish *could*, as a matter of fact, by a relatively small amount of further research, have fully confirmed their speculations before committing their ideas to paper (as, of course, Sharpe did, and Mazlish did to a slight degree, before putting their work in final form). The point is that a valuable bit of psychohistorical methodology is thus suggested, namely, that an author *deliberately* refrain from studying one or more bits of data which he knows to be available until after he has committed to paper and shared with colleagues portions of his formulations which could be confirmed or negated by the evidence in question. This principle would be applicable to psychohistorical works of either the present or the past.

There appear to be several other criteria, any one of them less convincing than the ability to make correct predictions, which, taken collectively, carry at least a moderate amount of weight with respect to estimating the scientific validity of a psychohistorical formulation. These criteria can be very briefly summarized as follows:

1. The economy of the formulation. That is to say, will a given psychological or psychohistorical assumption, not inherently unlikely but not susceptible of proof by direct evidence, make comprehensible a series of events otherwise requiring a number of separate assumptions or going unexplained?
2. The consistency of a psychodynamic explanation with the reasoning in accepted models or analogies. (e.g., It would be relatively sound, if one were certain of the facts, to infer a subject's use of the mechanism of projection on the basis of his sustained, objectively-baseless, suspicion.)
3. The internal consistency of the psychohistorical argument.

It is, after all, upon criteria analogous to these that hypotheses

in the physical sciences are announced and, often, to a degree, accepted, before the point at which more substantial evidence of correctness—"proofs"—can be adduced. This was, for example, the case with Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, which, while economical, internally consistent, and consistent with methods of physical reasoning, received real confirmation only after its publication with the observations of (a) a red shift of the spectral lines in the light of white dwarf stars, and (b) a bending of the light from distant stars passing close to the sun's gravitational field. Similarly, Pauli's postulation of the existence of the neutrino, on deductive grounds, was given rather wide credence before the actual discovery of that particle.

Since it is a far cry from physics to psychohistory, another criterion of scholarship in the latter field should be mentioned, which appears to be the most important of all. It is not a criterion of the validity of psychohistorical work but rather a frank and clear admission of the inevitable limitations of validity. It has to do with the scientific respectability of psychohistorical presentations, and it is at this point that issues of ethics and issues of scholarship come most clearly together. Complete honesty in presentations can do much to compensate for limitations in the evidence upon which the presentation is based. This criterion might be phrased as follows: *The invariable indication of mere probabilities as such, and the realization and indication that in building a structure of probabilities one can put together only a very short sequence of reasoning before reaching an improbable conclusion (which nevertheless might be the likeliest conclusion).* Thus, to oversimplify for the sake of clarity, if the probability that a given infantile trauma will produce a specific conflict is, roughly speaking, one-half, and the probability that the conflict will be dealt with by a specific defense mechanism is one-half, and the probability that use of the defense mechanism will produce a specific symptom is one-half, then, if one starts with firm evidence as to only one of these phenomena and tries to reason, either forward or backward to the others, one has but one chance in four of coming to the correct conclusions. Clearly, then, it would take several such sequences of reasoning, all bearing upon the same point, to give the author-investigator a respectable chance of being correct. The development of several such sequences is precisely what usually occurs in the clinical situation, but it is more difficult of achievement for the psychohistorian, and it is, therefore, his obligation to clarify the point with his readers repeatedly and not to rest content with one or two such qualifications in the introduction or embedded in his text.

A final point, also having to do with the scholarly respectability of psychohistory rather than with details of scholarship per se, should be strongly emphasized. Ideally, as noted earlier, the psychohistorian would be sufficiently aware of his biases, particularly those in the areas of values and ideology, to make corrections for them by consultations with colleagues of strongly differing biases. Since such a degree of awareness is likely to remain exceptional, one can hope that the next best measure, a frank statement by the psychohistorical author of *his* identity in this area, of his stance with respect to political, religious, social, and other values, will be regularly offered.

VI

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