

# Chapter 7

## Systems Psychodynamics in Psychobiography: The Individual Within the (Unconscious) Systems' Dynamics



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**Abstract** Systems psychodynamic (SP) perspectives have become vibrant in psychological and interdisciplinary research settings. Individuals are described within systems and system dynamics to deepen the understanding of the conscious and unconscious dynamics impacting on cognitive, symbolic, affective and behavioural processes within such systems. In across-the-lifespan research studies of individuals, psychobiographical research has become transdisciplinary since the 20th century. This lifespan research, which focuses specifically on exploring the life of historically and contemporary relevant and extraordinary individuals, considers the lives of writers, artists and entrepreneurs, and their creative works, by using psychological theories. An SP perspective, with its roots in psychoanalysis, fosters an understanding of the dynamics between individuals and system elements across the lifespan and might contribute to a deeper understanding of the (un-)conscious dynamics within individuals and systems, such as the environment, the family and organisations. Through the focus on the individual and the system, new insights into unconscious and often latent dynamics emerge. This chapter provides an insight into the use of SP theory in psychobiographical role behaviour.

**Keywords** Systems psychodynamics · Psychobiography · Unconscious · Psychoanalytic perspective · Role behaviour

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*What we do not make conscious  
Emerges later as fate.  
C. G. Jung*

## 7.1 Introduction

Systems psychodynamic (SP) perspectives have become vibrant in psychological and interdisciplinary research settings with the focus on the study of conscious and unconscious systemic, dynamic, cognitive, affective and symbolic behaviour manifesting at micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (organisational) levels (Koortzen & Cilliers, 2002).

As far as research studies on the lifespan of individuals is concerned, psychobiographical research has become transdisciplinary since the 20th century (Carducci, 2009; Kőváry, 2011; Ponterotto, 2015; Schultz, 2005). This lifespan research, which focuses specifically on exploring the lives of historically and contemporarily relevant and extraordinary individuals (Fouché & van Niekerk, 2010), applies psychological theories to study the lives of writers, artists and entrepreneurs, and their creative works, (Mayer, 2017; Runyan, 2005). Classical psychological theories, such as psychoanalytically based ones, are often used to explore either the entire life of an extraordinary person in depth or certain specific life events (Ponterotto, 2015). Runyan (2005) emphasises that the life of the whole person is taken into account. This is probably based on the idea that most researchers utilise theories in psychobiography, which take cognisance of the individual using individual-focused theories, such as psychoanalysis and personality psychology, and not necessarily the (un)conscious dynamics of systems surrounding and impacting on the individual.

An SP perspective promotes an understanding of the dynamics between individuals and systemic elements, and might contribute to a deeper understanding of the unconscious dynamics within individuals and systems, such as the environment, the family or organisations (Cilliers, 2004; Cilliers & Terblanche, 2010). Through the focus on the unconscious dynamics between the individual and the surrounding systems, new insights emerge of the unconscious and often latent dynamics, which might lead to certain thinking patterns and behavioural dynamics.

## 7.2 Purpose, Aim and Contribution

In this chapter of the book, the authors argue that SP theory can contribute new insights into the life and creative works of selected individuals and thereby add new perspectives to classical theories and psychobiographical frameworks. SP can therefore be understood as an expansion of previously used psychobiographical theories. The argument (as in Johnson, 2019) is that psychobiography as a theory and method

needs to consider new perspectives and theories in order to expand its focus and explore new views on complex impacts relating to possible patterns in the individual life (Anderson & Dunlop, 2019), an individual's life patterns and how he/she takes up roles. Mullen (2019) provides great insight into the range of methodological approaches used in psychobiography in the context of truth in psychobiographical works.

The aim of this chapter is to provide insight into SP in order to explore its value in psychobiographical research. The contribution to the psychobiographical discourse lies in the discussion of how systems psychodynamics might contribute to the field of psychobiography.

### 7.3 The Use of Theory in Psychobiographical Works

Psychobiographies are based on the analysis of the lives of extraordinary individuals by using psychological theories (Eliastam, 2011; Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2005). The aim of this is to gain a holistic view of the individual's life (Schultz, 2005) or certain key life events. Psychoanalysis has often been used as a theory to analyse the life of an extraordinary person (e.g. Kőváry, 2011; Ogilvie, 2004) and to gain a deeper understanding of his/her inner world.

Many (psycho)biographers use Freudian psychoanalysis or a variant thereof (Elms, 2002), following Freud (1910), who invented modern psychobiography with his work on Leonardo da Vinci. According to Ponterotto, Reynolds, Morel, and Cheung (2015), most of the theories used in psychobiography are psychoanalytic and psychodynamic, such as Freud's theory of childhood behaviour, Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby & World Health Organization, 1952; Kelley, 2019) or the object relation theory of Winnicott (1969, 1975, 2006, Verwey & Knight, 2019). Psychosocial development theories thus focus on the importance of conscious and unconscious forces in guiding behaviours, personality conflicts and the effects of childhood behaviour in adult life (Bastable, 2008). Well-known theories used in psychobiographies in the context of psychosocial development are, for example, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950, 1977) with its eight developmental stages (see Fouché, Naidoo, & Botha, 2019). Several psychobiographies have used Erikson's theory on systems psychosocial development, such as Ruiters' (2013) work on Michael Jackson, Fouché, Nel, and van Niekerk's psychobiography on Helen Suzman or Marx's (2015) study on Margaret Hilda Thatcher.

During the past years, psychoanalytic enquires about psychobiographies have been adapted (Ponterotto, 2014; Schultz, 2005), and interest in this field has increased in the sense that various methodologies and theories are considered in the exploration of the person in psychobiographical research (Carlson, 1988).

Ponterotto (2014) argues that psychobiography can be based on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, which has resulted in psychobiography becoming a well-established field of study (Ponterotto, 2014).

Besides the focus on the extraordinary person being researched, from a systemic perspective the phenomenon of countertransference with regard to the psychobiographer has been addressed in psychobiographic research (Strouse, 1987). Psychodynamic explanations are often used to describe and explain behaviour from an intrapersonal perspective, as, for example, in Skinner (1979).

In addition to psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory, the “narrative turn in psychology” (Bruner, 1990, 2004; Sarbin, 1986) has contributed to the analysis of life stories through narrative inquiry (link Androutsopoulou, Dima, Papageorgiou, & Papanikolaou, 2019; Schultz, 2001, 2003). Various forms of narrative analysis have been used in psychobiographies (e.g. Alexander, 1990; McAdams, 1988, 1997), and Knight (2019) emphasise that new methods and theories for life-narrative analysis are required, which, at a deeper level, take into account unconscious researcher bias.

Schultz and Lawrence (2017) argue that experimental theory and method also contribute well to psychobiographical study designs and can add value to the research field. Other researchers (Mayer, 2017; Petersen, 2006; Ponterotto, 2015) emphasise the value of positive psychology theories for psychobiographical analysis, including specifically the positive in the focus of analysis. Recently, this perspective has been extended, and it has been argued that positive psychology in terms of PP 2.0 should be taken into account by psychobiographers in order to develop a balanced view on the life events in an extraordinary person’s life (Mayer & May, 2019).

Anderson and Dunlop (2019) argue that by choosing a theory to analyse the life of an extraordinary person, the psychobiographer needs to consider the cultural factor. It is thus essential that the theory fits the person and the cultural context (Anderson & Dunlop, 2019). Also Burnell, Nel, Fouché, and Van Niekerk (2019) emphasise that in selecting a suitable psychobiographical subject of research, contextual factors need to be considered in the context of psychosocial research.

In the following sections, the authors present the theoretical approaches used in systems psychodynamics, and explore which factors are currently used in psychobiography, and describe those factors that could be taken into account in future psychobiographical research.

## 7.4 Systems Psychodynamics

Systems psychodynamics developed at the Tavistock Institute in London (Brunner, Nutkevitch, & Sher, 2006). SP can be defined as the study of unconscious patterns of work relations and their influence on leadership and authority, and how task and role formation, conflict and boundaries influence relationships and relatedness in the leadership system (Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; De Board, 2014). Systems refer to the structural aspects of an organisation or institution (Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001) such as the primary task and how it is operationalised in organisational design, division of labour, procedures, processes, levels of authority and reporting relationships. Psychodynamics refers to the psychoanalytic perspective on the unconscious individual, group (social) and

organisational experiences and mental processes as a source and a consequence of repressed organisational behaviours. SP offers a depth psychology organisational theory, an organisational development consultancy and coaching stance focusing on leadership and authority (Armstrong, 2005; Neumann, Kellner, & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997) and a psychosocial research design and method (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

Theoretically, SP is based on the following approaches:

- **Social/systemic psychoanalysis**  
This view (Freud, 1921) studies consciousness and unconsciousness and its manifestations in the id (unconscious urges, drives and instincts), the ego (the processing of logic, memory and judgement), and the superego or conscience (concerned with obeying morality and social norms).
- **Object relations**  
This view (Clarke, Hahn, & Hoggett, 2008; Klein, 1997) studies the way in which significant early childhood connections to objects (a person, group, organisation, idea or symbol) continue to influence the individual's behaviour throughout adulthood in its representation (e.g. the internalised mother/parent). The infant splits the external world into a good part associated with the mother that feeds and comforts it (the "good breast" representing love or libido) and a bad part that denies it food and comfort (the "bad breast" representing aggression or morbido) (Klein, 1997). The family can be seen as an organisation with a hierarchy and emotional complexity (Czander, 1993). The object relations formed in the first five years of the individual's life (e.g. with parental figures) are unconsciously transferred to authority figures at school and later in organisations. Winnicott (2006) refers to transitional objects and potential space as concepts to understand the representation of valuable attachments in the unconscious.
- **Open systems theory**  
A system is defined as a complex, organised, unitary whole composed of two or more interdependent parts, components or subsystems, and delineated by identifiable and permeable boundaries from its external environment (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Stapley, 2006). Examples are families and organisations, consisting of a set of interconnected parts interacting with other objects and systems. Interconnections imply that a system imports energy and information from outside itself, transforms that energy and information in some way, and then exports the transformed results back to the outer system (Colman & Bexton, 1975).
- **Social systems**  
This view (Winnicott, 2006) studies social defence systems and their role in containing anxiety on behalf of the total system.
- **Group relations theory**  
This view (Bion, 1961) is defined as the study of the dynamics of groups and organisations and its conscious (mostly rational) and unconscious (mostly irrational) behaviours. Contrary to psychoanalysis, the focus is not only on the individual (Dimitrov, 2008). The group-as-a-whole perspective implies that members are in continuous interdependent relationships, where the group develops a life of its own as a consequence of the fantasies and projections of its members (Cytrynbaum &

Noumair, 2004; Stapley, 2006). Individual behaviour is deemed to be carried out on behalf of the larger system. Individual meaning-making processes result in a state of relatedness with others, culminating in mutual influence and collective thinking (Stapley, 2006).

- Systemic transactional analysis

This view (Erskine, 2010; Tangolo, 2015) analyses systemic ego state functioning and scripts towards the understanding of how they contribute to the system's identity and functioning. An ego state is a coherent system and consistent pattern of feelings and experiences directly related to a pattern of behaviour (Berne, 1961). The three ego states are the parent (nurture, control), adult (rationality) and child (spontaneity, attention seeking, rebellion). A script is a complex set of transactions based on the regressive enactment of introjections and transference from a previous time that formed recurring patterns now used as coping strategies (Cornell & Hargaden, 2005).

As a consulting and coaching stance, SP is characterised as follows. It offers a developmentally focused, psychoeducational process for the understanding of the deep and covert behaviour in the system (De Board, 2014; Klein, 2005; Sher, 2013). Its primary task is formulated as pushing the boundaries of awareness to better understand the unconscious meaning of systemic leadership behaviour in society and its organisations (Armstrong, 2005; Lawrence, 1999). It believes that the organisation is socially constructed (Campbell, 2007), that the macro, meso and micro systems mirror one another and that the system as a whole strives towards equilibrium between consciousness/unconsciousness, rational/irrational behaviour, inclusion/exclusion and attachment/detachment (Campbell & Huffington, 2008).

Anxiety is seen as the core behavioural concept in SP consultancy. It is defined as fear of the future, the experience underlying any systemic experience of intense emotions, mental anguish, anticipation and dread about something unexpected, unpleasant and unwanted, such as the loss of love objects and desired parts of the system's identity (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015; Curtis, 2015). Anxiety can be categorised as free floating (not linked to a specific object), survival (being physically or emotionally threatened), performance (having to execute a task under experienced attack such as criticism), persecutory (feeling victimised), paranoid (feeling threatened) (Long, 2008) and depressive (Curtis, 2015). Anxiety serves as the driving force of workplace systemic relatedness and manifests as follows at all systemic levels (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015; Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle, & Pooley, 2004). These forms of anxiety can be experienced by a subsystem, such as coping with performing a complex task and its emotional demands, being and staying in role and its systemic representation demands and defining one's organisational identity while struggling with many unconscious power matters (Bion, 1961). The system copes with anxiety through the use of defence mechanisms (Blackman, 2004) aimed at protection and surviving. Defences can be classified as realistic (real danger that needs responding to), neurotic (repression, regression, sublimation, transference, countertransference), psychotic (splitting, projection, projective identification) and perverse (denial of reality, acting in an entitled manner, displacing objects) (Long, 2008).

Group and organisational systemic anxiety is acted out in various ways encapsulated in five basic behavioural assumptions, namely dependency, fight/flight, pairing (Bion, 1961; 1983), me-ness (Turquet, 1974) and one-ness/we-ness (Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996). These behaviours manifest unconsciously, systemically and unanimously as a group mentality. Dependence refers to the system's experienced anxiety around its need for security and structure, which is projected onto a perceived strong or parental object. When these needs are not met, the system experiences frustration, helplessness, powerlessness and deauthorisation (Czander, 1993; Stapley, 2006) manifesting as counter-dependence. Fight/flight refers to the system's experienced performance anxiety in the here-and-now and the defence to save itself by either fighting the imagined enemy or to remove the self physically or emotionally from the danger (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Fight responses manifest in aggression against the self, peers (with envy, jealousy, competition, elimination, boycotting, sibling rivalry, fighting for a position in the system, an assumed privileged relationship with authority figures) or authority itself (Klein, 2005). Flight responses manifest physically in, say, avoidance of others, illness or resignation. Psychological flight responses include defence mechanisms such as avoidance of threatening situations or emotions in the here-and-now, rationalisation and intellectualisation (Gould et al., 2004). Pairing manifests in order to cope with the anxiety around alienation and loneliness. The system tries to pair with a perceived powerful object (individual, subgroup, idea) (Colman & Bexton, 1975). The unconscious fantasy is that creation occurs in pairs, which will save the system from threat (Colman & Geller, 1985). One-ness (or we-ness) refers to the system's effort to join into a powerful union or omnipotent force, surrendering the self to passive participation, thus living in the fantasy of wholeness and safety (Turquet, 1974). Me-ness refers to survival and solace in the own inner world, putting the self above the larger system, avoiding the outer world and its reality (Lawrence et al., 1996).

SP consultation and coaching study the assumption of a leadership role, which involves a number of core behavioural constructs (Czander, 1993; Gould et al., 2001; Kets de Vries, 1991; Klein, 2005; Koortzen & Cilliers, 2002; Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). In SP "role" is seen as the place, area or interface between person and organisation, or between personal and social systems (Newton et al., 2006). Taking up a role refers to consciously being appointed in a task position, as well as unconsciously managing the complexity where person and institution meet in the exercise of representing the self and the other (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Role consists of the normative, experiential and phenomenal parts (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994), where the experienced difference between these represents systemic anxiety (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015). The normative contains the conscious, rational and measurable work components. The existential contains the system's introjections defined as the unconscious incorporation of external ideas, feelings, attitudes and values into the system's mind and behaviour—the external is taken into the inner self (Klein, 1997). The phenomenal contains the unconscious projections and projective identifications about competence received from the other, as well as the projections made onto the other. Projection refers to unconscious transferences of the system's own impressions and feelings (often unwanted, disowned, denied, unacceptable,



undesired, unrecognised or ambivalent experiences) to external objects or persons. The capacity to attribute certain mental contents from one system to another can alter the behaviour of that system through the identification with the contents, which is referred to as projective identification (French & Simpson, 2015). The system's valence (unconscious disposition) determines the projections it identifies with.

Role identity comprises the following domains: Task is the basic component of role where the primary task contains anxiety, and off-task/anti-task behaviour indicates high levels of free-floating anxiety (Neumann et al., 1997). Boundaries (e.g. ego, time, task, territory, organisational structure) refer to either a tight or loose permeable space around and between parts of the role system, keeping it safe and contained or causing vulnerability or suspicion (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009). Authority refers to the right granted to work on the primary task as a result of rank or office occupancy, to issue commands and to punish violations (Hirschhorn, 1997). Authority is bestowed (in terms of the organigram in the mind) from above (the organisation, leadership), the side (colleagues), below (subordinates) and from within (self-authorisation) (Czander, 1993). Containment refers to holding one's own and others' transformational anxiety as a potential space where thinking can move from elementary to complex (Clarke et al., 2008). Valence refers to the systems unconscious inclination to act in a specific manner, which includes being vulnerable towards specific deep-rooted introjections and projections (Gould et al., 2001). Hence role identity manifests in how the system consciously (normatively) and unconsciously (existentially, phenomenally) assumes its role, manages the primary task and the different relevant boundary conditions, authorises itself and others, being authorised and contains anxiety towards rational thinking (Sievers, 2009). Erikson (1959) describes identity as a subjective experience of a persistent sense of sameness within oneself. According to Arundale (2017), identity is formed fundamentally by the individual's object relations, the other in his/her life and the quality of these relationships, particularly those whom the individual has loved or hated. Identity is dynamic and to be discovered throughout life through a feeling-full, intuitive finding of enduring aspects of the self and selected items as they appear in consciousness.

In terms of research, SP focuses on working "beneath the surface" (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). A psychosocial stance is used in the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of group dynamics, observation and the co-construction of the research environment by the researcher and the researched (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2005; Holloway & Jefferson, 2010). It accepts the notion that the unconscious plays a significant role in the construction of reality and the way others are perceived, the generation of research data and the construction of the research environment ("the world is not the way it is, but rather the way we are"—Anaïs Nin). Reification as interpretive stance is used—seeing human phenomena as if they were things (in non-human terms) (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).



## 7.5 Bringing Systems Psychodynamics into Psychobiography

Systemic psychoanalysis (Freud, 1921) and object relations (Clarke et al., 2008; Klein, 1997; Winnicott, 1960, 1975, 2006) have commonly be used in psychobiographical research. However, the open systems theory (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Stapley, 2006) has hardly been used in psychobiographical stances to consider the individual within his/her systems. Furthermore, social systems theory, which studies social defence systems and their role in containing anxiety on behalf of the total system, has not yet been considered in psychobiographical research. The reason for this could be the fact that psychobiographies focus on individuals and their anxieties, instead of interpreting the anxiety of the individual as a mirror and/or reflection of the systemic (un-) conscious group dynamics of the total system.

Furthermore, group relations theory has also been somewhat neglected in psychobiographical research since, in psychobiography, the focus, again, is on the individual rather than on groups and organisations. However, it is argued here that the group relations theories could contribute new insights into psychobiographies in the study of group relations and the individual as a group member. For example, which extraordinary individuals carry what aspects within groups and organisations? How does a selected extraordinary individual react to the systemic group dynamics? How does he/she contribute? How can SP be used in psychobiography to facilitate individuals'/clients' awareness of their unconscious role histories and biographies towards the understanding of the roles they assumed in their systems in the past and how that impacts on and repeats in their present systems?

Erskine's (2010) theoretical approach has been used in psychobiographies to analyse systemic ego states functioning and scripts towards the understanding of how they contribute to the system's identity and functioning. The three ego states (parent, adult, child) are used as coping mechanisms and have been explored in psychobiographical research.

Group and organisational systemic anxiety theories have hardly been used in psychobiographical research in which the leadership role is taken up involving a number of core behavioural constructs, referring to role taking, introjection, projection and projective identification. A question in psychobiographical research could be how the individual deals with (organisational) systemic anxiety and which core behavioural constructs are at play in the person researched.

## 7.6 Role Biography

Systems psychodynamics proposes that, in contrast to personal psychobiography, which traces the development of a personality over time, role biography can be used to emphasise how past roles unconsciously affect and drive present roles and behaviour (Long, 2008). Role biography (Newton et al., 2006) is described as the

study of the individual as a person-in-role informed by the various family and work roles that they have taken up throughout their lives. Long (2008) also refers to role history in terms of how a specific organisational role is shaped over time by the various incumbents, and especially by the original role holder, followed by how the role impacts on the present individual role holder. The combination of role biography and role history gives the role holder a sense of how past experiences might be unconsciously influencing present role behaviour and identity (Akthar & Twemlow, 2018). In this sense, identity refers to a subjective experience of the persistent sense of sameness within the self (Erikson, 1959), which is based on the individual's inner working model (whereas character and personality refer to the description of the individual in others' description of the individual's behaviour).

Long (2008, pp. 228–233) proposes role biography as a collaborative conversational method to understand the impact of work roles taken up by clients throughout their lives, on their present roles. The purpose is to facilitate the client's sense of uniqueness in undertaking a role and the valence that unconsciously predisposes specific role behaviour. Clients are asked to draw on paper, the work roles they have taken up throughout their lives at different ages and explore specific chosen roles (including child "work" roles in the family of origin). The consultant works with the client in exploring the biography. The client is encouraged to think of the role-in-the-mind (Hirschhorn, 1997). The consultant does not make interpretations of the material, but may offer associations that are evoked, which the client may or may not accept. This implies learning through self-authorisation, while also reflecting on own defensive behaviour.

Through role biography, the systems psychodynamic consultant facilitates an understanding of how work roles taken up by the individual throughout life are influencing the present role. The task for individuals is to learn about the uniqueness of their own role behaviour, the fact that roles are not taken up in isolation or a vacuum and how they have developed a pattern or role history in role taking. Role biography can be understood from the individual's perspective, from the role's perspective and from a mutual influencing perspective.

### ***7.6.1 Individual Role History and Biography***

The individual's associative unconscious (Long, 2008) forms before birth where it is attuned to the mother's emotional experiences. After birth and in the first five years of development (Freud, 1921), attachments with objects are formed in terms of those "above" (authority figures such as parents) and those "alongside" (siblings, peers) (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). The individual may be able to develop and transform these relationships, but he/she cannot discard them—the person is unconsciously and inherently attached to parental and sibling objects and their symbolic representations (Freud, 1921; Klein, 1997). SP argues that we are all born into organisations—we just call them families. This implies that adult relationships in organisations, are always to some extent influenced by these early relationships. New friends and

work colleagues become substitute figures for these first attachments—taking over a type of emotional heritage based on memory traces left behind by the original objects (Nicholi, 2003). The above applies to people as objects as well as to roles taken up in the relatedness to the other. This transference from the past implies a displacement of feelings and attitudes from past objects onto new objects, especially if the new object shows similarity to the past ones. Transference from previous relationships and relatedness manifests, for example, in new authority relationships such as leader-follower or manager-employee. Displaced feelings from authority figures in childhood onto those in the present distorts and causes conflict with the present authority. The above explication is also based on research by Dias (2016), Mitchell (2008), Solan (2015), Volkan and Ast (1997) and Winnicott (1960, 1975, 1988, 1990, 2006).

### ***7.6.2 Role History and Role Biography***

A role has a history that takes on a life of its own in how it has been influenced by previous role holders. This includes the expectations that the previous role holders had and brought into the role. For example, the role of the president of a country or an organisation, changes over time because it is impacted by how various role holders have acted in the role (e.g. through introjections) and how the other has reacted to their use of authority in the role. Thus, some of these behaviours become formally and informally institutionalized and unconsciously acted out by the new role holder. Even the role of a bully in a system can be institutionalized—the individual may leave the system, but the institutionalized bullying behaviour can be taken over by someone else (Cilliers, 2012).

### ***7.6.3 The Mutual Influence Between Role and Individual***

No role or individual exists in a vacuum—the role was unconsciously and emotionally impacted, constructed and deconstructed by its previous role holders, which influences the way in which the new role holder takes up the role. In the same vein, the present role holder impacts on the identity of the role. The present role is a coming together of its history with the role biography of the role holder, the place where the two objects meet (Long, 2008).

Role biography is also relevant in organisational role analysis, also known as organisational role consultation (Newton et al., 2006) and described as a form of psychodynamically oriented individual consultancy. The focus is on the analysis of individual transferences in the context of work, as well as the interrelatedness of such dynamic processes with the unconscious dynamics in the organisation as a whole. The task is to provide opportunities for the role holder to gain insight into and an understanding of the way in which the professional role of the client is shaped by

the organisation and the role holder himself/herself, consciously and unconsciously. This so-called “binocular vision” studies the complex interplay and interrelatedness of the personal dynamic of the individual and the psychological dynamics in the organisation. This method uses concepts such as the organisation-in-the-mind and the organisation-as-whole. Role analysis separates the individual from the organisation and studies the unknown and the unthought in the organisation. Role consultation studies the reintegration in its focus on the exploration of subjective experiences such as the individual’s experience of his/her professional role in the organisation. The assumption is that in social systems the individual’s experience reflects more than just the individual, and that the whole and its parts are inextricably intertwined, so that the exploration of single phenomena will open the way to an interpretation of the whole.

## 7.7 Conclusions and Recommendations

Psychobiographical research needs to cover a broad variety of psychological and life development circumstances to focus on specific perspectives and aspects of the person being researched. It therefore requires a diversity of theories and methodologies applied to explore the various aspects of an individual’s life.

In the past, most of the theories used in psychobiographical research have focused on the person as such, to some extent taking the context into account. However, hardly any research has explored the life of an extraordinary individual from the systems psychodynamic perspective. This complex theoretical perspective could support an in-depth understanding of the person and his/her interlinkages from the systemic group perspective.

With regard to the theoretical expansion of previously used theoretical approaches in psychobiographical research, it is recommended that systemic psychoanalysis, object relations, open systems theory, social systems, group relations theory, systemic transactional analysis and SP consulting stances are included.

The use of one or more of these approaches can lead to new insights and perspectives on the life of extraordinary individuals. At the same time, the use of these approaches in the field of psychobiography can also support the evaluation, reconstruction or even strengthening of the theoretical approaches (Mayer, 2017). This is especially so because these approaches will be used to develop a lifespan perspective based on a system” psychodynamic perspective. It is therefore recommended that systems psychodynamic theories should be used in psychobiographical research to contribute to new insights as well as theoretical and methodological discourses, which will take cognisance of the context of the individual within his/her relationships, as well as the sociocultural and societal contexts.

SP offers a developmentally focused, psychoeducational process for the understanding of the deep and covert behaviour in the system (De Board, 2014; Klein, 2005; Sher, 2013). The SP perspective might therefore provide further information for counselling, coaching and educational settings in which the impact of the SP is viewed in terms of the individual. In this instance, SP theory could provide a the-

oretical base for practitioners who intend working with SP in their practice, since this would provide insights for clients and patients into how SP has impacted on extraordinary individuals, which might serve as an example to address SP within these settings.

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