Using Biographical Methods To Understand Managerial Behavior And Personality

Joan R. Kofodimos
Manus Associates and
Center for Creative Leadership

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Post Office Box P-1
Greensboro, North Carolina 27402-1660

(919) 288-7210

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Joan R. Kofodimos, Ph.D.
Manus Associates and
Center for Creative Leadership

5000 Laurinda Drive
Post Office Box P-1
Greensboro, North Carolina 27402-1660

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Introduction

This paper has a dual purpose. First, I would like to describe a biographical approach for studying managerial behavior and personality. Second, I hope to inspire researchers who study managers, as well as practitioners whose job is to help managers, to incorporate some of the tactics, principles, and insights of the biographical approach into their own research and practice.

What is biography? At the most general level, the aim of biography is to portray a person's nature and the events and experiences in his life fully and broadly, in order to advance an understanding of that individual, and also to understand phenomena related to the individual's life—for example, his creative output, or significant achievements, or historical events in which he participated. Usually the individual's life history, his environment and culture, and the themes and needs of his inner life are invoked to explain his achievements and accomplishments. Within this general domain, the specific focus of a particular biography can vary widely. Gail Sheehy (1988), for example, used a biographical approach to study U.S. presidential candidates, and demonstrated how the unique circumstances of each candidate's life, and the inner forces driving him, shaped his leadership style and political beliefs. (For classic examples of political biography, see Burns [1978], or Barber [1968].)

In contrast to the political genre of biography lies literary biography. A literary biographer focuses on a writer as his subject; his aim is to understand the genesis of the writer's creative work in her inner life. Literary and political biographers share a fundamental premise: They seek to understand the individual's inner being, and the trajectory of her life over time, in order to illuminate her notable achievements or interesting attributes; and they seek by understanding the individual's life and achievements to advance an understanding of human beings in general.

Those who want to understand managers and management can also gain insights by using the biographical approach. This is because, in an important respect, being a manager is like being a writer or politician: The managerial role is ambiguous, a "blank slate" which takes a particular and unique form for every individual manager who occupies it. The unique shape of the person-in-role thus reflects both objective job demands and personality playing out: How a manager shapes his role is a function of who he is as a person, his style and his personality. The biographical method allows us to understand managerial work, behavior, and effectiveness in the context of the human beings occupying those roles.

I will use our own team's research to illustrate how biography can be used with benefit to study managers. We (Bob Kaplan, Bill Drath, and I) evolved the biographical approach in the process of trying to understand why senior executives so rarely sought help in improving their effectiveness (via a leadership training program, for example), and why so little of this kind of help was available. Furthermore, since we were members of an organization (the Center for Creative Leadership) whose mission involves training and developing managers and leaders, and since our purpose in conducting research was not only to generate knowledge, but also to gain insights that would guide training and development activities, we also wanted to know what the "ideal development opportunity" for senior executives would look like. We did not think it would look much like a traditional training program. But whatever the form, we wanted to create such a development program based on knowledge of the special challenges executives face, their "typical" strengths and weaknesses, and the most targeted way to help them improve their effectiveness.

Our research goals, then, were to understand: 1) the varying styles and patterns of behavior of different executives; 2) the strengths and weaknesses of these styles (the areas in which executives could develop in order to enhance effectiveness); and 3) the forces in executives and their environments which inhibit, and those which enhance, the chance that the executives will make the needed changes.

I will return to this study later to illustrate the tactics of biographical research. For now, the relevant point is that we developed a biographical approach for examining these topics because as we talked to executives and sought to make sense of the patterns in their styles, we were helped greatly by looking for the underlying forces (which we referred to as "character" or "personality") giving unity and rationale to what otherwise would be discrete behavioral patterns. Looking for these underlying forces, we traced backwards into the individual's life and found patterns over time reflecting how his character was formed. We came to see how an executive's style is integrally linked to deep-rooted and fundamental aspects of his character, as that character has been shaped through life.*

The methodological framework we designed to study executives paralleled the conceptual framework we were developing regarding the links between style and personality. These two, method and concept, became increasingly clear as we struggled to understand executive behavior and as we dug into the body of theory and research in biography, psychohistory, and analytic psychology. We were inspired by several respected research studies in the field of psychology and management that have investigated personality and development in adulthood by using intensive investigations of single or multiple cases. These include Murray's (1938) work in "personology," White's (1966) study of lives, Vaillant's (1977) exploration of life adaptation, Levinson and his colleagues' (1978) work on adult development and life structure, the longitudinal examination by Bray, Campbell and Grant (1974) of managerial careers, and Maccoby's (1976) investigations of leaders.

Since the conceptual framework of style and personality underlies the principles and tactics of the biographical method, I will first lay out the elements of this conceptual framework. I will then describe the principles of the biographical method before illustrating how these principles played out in the specific approach we developed to study executives. I will conclude by explicating some cautions and benefits regarding the use of biography.

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*I will use the masculine pronoun when referring specifically to the results of our research, since to this point we have limited ourselves (due to the realities of the executive population) to male executives. However, when discussing biography in general and how biography can be used to study managers, because the points apply to both male and female subjects, I will alternate masculine and feminine pronouns.

A Conceptual Framework of Managerial Behavior and Personality

1. Personality and behavior are intertwined.

The fundamental premise of biography, as we described earlier, is that the aspects of a person's inner life or personality take concrete form in her actions. An individual's personality—as we use the term here—involves such inner forces and drives as her aspirations and needs for herself, her self-image, her defenses and fears. These things are reflected in such actions as her choice of a career, the way she behaves in carrying out that work, the way she forms relationships, and her choice of people to form them with. This assumption is reflected in one biographer's statement: "[The goal of biography is] to portray . . . 'the whole sense of a person,' the relationship between the public ideal of himself, which he holds as his 'personal mythology,' and the inner fears, longings, and spirited aspirations that call it forth" (Pachter, 1979, p. 13).

This premise is most clearly explicated in literary biography. Literary biographers believe that the writer's literary creations are outgrowths of her "inner consciousness, . . . [the] deeper springs of [her] being" (Edel, 1959, p. xv), and thus the biographer can gain insight into the writer's inner life by exploring her work. This does not involve interpreting the events and experiences in the written work as strictly autobiographical, but rather looking at the emotions and images depicted, the assumptions and principles demonstrated, the morals and messages conveyed in the writer's written work as reflective of the processes, conflicts, and themes of her inner life.

Similarly, psychologists such as Vaillant (1977) and Levinson et al. (1978) see life activities and events as choices which reflect inner processes. According to Levinson et al., an individual's "life structure," "the underlying pattern of design of [his] life at a given time," (1978, p. 41) reflects the interaction between inner self and outer world.

2. We can understand a person's behavior in one life role or aspect better if we also investigate other roles or aspects.

Though the researcher may be especially interested in a certain aspect of a person's life—executive style, in our case—he is aided in understanding this aspect by exploring other aspects and roles as well. The issues and problems that a person faces may vary in his different life roles, such as career, family, or community; and the person himself may behave differently in each of those roles. But the inner person remains the same. In fact, we have found in other research that these spheres of life are interdependent (Kofodimos, 1984, 1989). By looking at variations and constancies in a person's behavior across life situations, one can gain insight into the underlying forces driving those behavioral patterns. This point may seem evident, but it stands in contrast to much managerial research which investigates an individual's managerial behavior in isolation from the rest of him.

3. Personality and behavior are influenced by life history.

Biographers and psychologists alike believe that a person's behavior and character are shaped by his cumulative life experiences, relationships, and environments. As Otto Rank said, "The past and future live in the psychological present. . . . Whatever is significant in a person's past—such as early childhood relations—will be brought into his present relationships" (quoted in May, 1973, p. 26). Many biographical researchers look at life history not only to understand the roots of an individual's current personality and life structure, but also because they are interested in the processes by which personality and life structure unfold over time. Ideally, a researcher can devise a longitudinal study that collects data over a long period of time: Vaillant (1977) had data collected over thirty years, White (1966) over twenty. Lacking this, we must reconstruct the past by asking for subjects' (and others') retrospective accounts, and by using archival data.

Our reliance on this principle emerged over the course of our early work. We had originally intended to focus on the executive's current life and the links between present-day style and present-day personality, but we found that elements of the past seemed to play a powerful role in those present-day issues, continually appearing as precursors and explanatory factors. We realized that the executive's past—family relationships, lifestyle in youth, education, and career history—would be a key to our understanding and interpreting of his current personality and life structure.

4. "Strengths" and "weaknesses" are intertwined.

The psychoanalytic approach to understanding leadership, though similar to our biographical approach in many respects, tends to focus on the pathology of leadership, on how leaders' inner conflicts create problems in leadership. Granted, biographers are also interested in inner conflict. As one said, "The biographer's quest is . . . to discover the lies and delusions by which all men and women defend themselves against the indignities of life" (Pachter, 1979, p. 3). But what is most interesting to the biographer is how these lies and delusions are transcended and transformed into greatness, genius, creativity, accomplishment. Frequently the greatness reflects how the individual has constructively coped with the conflicts; perhaps the great accomplishments would not have been possible without the inner conflicts providing the underlying energy. Erikson (1969), in his psychohistorical study of Gandhi's leadership, found his initial idealization of Gandhi shattered when he discovered evidence of Gandhi's repressiveness and cruelty regarding the sexual nature of his followers. Erikson went on to establish the roots of this repressiveness in Gandhi's ambivalence regarding his own sexuality. But Erikson concluded that this inner conflict also provided the impetus for the value Gandhi placed on self-discipline and for his development of the method of militant nonviolence, which ultimately liberated the Indian people. Without the inner conflict, the energy and the approach with which Gandhi changed the course of history might not have come into being.

Management researchers often ignore the link between inner conflict and outward achievement. In their quest for the qualities of the "perfect leader," they draw up idealized lists of "perfect leader" attributes. The goal for a leader is to develop as many of these ideal attributes, and eliminate as many weaknesses, as possible. This approach is unrealistic: Every leader, by virtue of his personality, has some characteristics or predispositions which play out as "strengths" and others which become "weaknesses." These strengths and weaknesses are often closely related psychologically (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Whether an individual excels or not depends on the fit of these characteristics with the demands of the managerial role, the flexibility and self-awareness with which he handles those characteristics, and ultimately on his ability to creatively translate his inner conflicts into outer achievement.

5. Personality and behavior are shaped by environmental forces.

An individual's personality and life structure are influenced not just by her personal history, but also by social and cultural forces acting over the course of her life and at the moment (Nadel, 1984; Erikson, 1968, 1969; Maccoby, 1976). Not only do individuals internalize aspects of the environments in which they are embedded, but they also shape their environments to reflect their personalities and behaviors. This is especially true if they are leaders and therefore have the power to impose their own characteristics onto their surroundings (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1985). So, the person's environment—the organization, community, family—represents to some degree the world she has created around her, and thus can be probed to look for qualities which reflect and illuminate her inner self (Geertz, 1973).

6. Personality demonstrates both continuity and change over time.

A person's basic character remains in some fundamental ways constant over time. Vaillant (1977) studied lives over time because he thought that certain significant processes in individual personality, "adaptive mechanisms," would be manifested in behavioral patterns that repeated over time. He believed that the most powerful of these processes were those manifested in behavior most frequently and over the longest period of time.

Yet along with continuity, there is also change in the primary concerns at different life stages, and personality patterns will take different outward forms over time depending on these concerns (Levinson et al., 1978). The differences in how an individual reacts to a certain issue at different points in time (for example, a man's attitude toward his wife when they are first married, versus his attitude toward her after twenty years together) can illuminate the nature of the individual's primary concerns or needs at each of those times.

7. Behavior, and perceptions of it, vary across situations, people, and time. We can take advantage of this variation to understand the complexity of personality.

The primary way we learn about an individual's personality is by looking at its visible manifestations in behavior, which always occur in the context of relationships. Even when the biographer seeks direct access to the inner feelings, attitudes, and fantasies of a subject, these are only knowable to the biographer after being filtered through a process of interaction (and thus a relationship with the subject), either through sharing in conversation, or by the subject's putting thoughts and feelings on paper for the biographer or others to read.

But when we look at a person's behavior and interaction in order to make inferences about her personality, we find that how she behaves—and how others perceive that behavior—varies widely in different relationships and situations. These variations in behavior and perception should not be seen simply as distortions or illusions but rather as representations of varying aspects of a person's complex personality, aspects which will be evoked by certain situations, roles, or relationships. We can interpret these variations in behavior and perception in several different ways. First, an individual's reaction to another is influenced by what Sullivan (Mullahy, 1952) calls "parataxic distortion," in which the other person's qualities evoke memories of significant people from one's past. For example, a manager who grew up in fear of a harshly evaluative father may respond to his boss with fear when performance appraisal comes around, and seek to defend himself against his boss as he did against his father. Second, in interacting with another, a person "projects," or attributes to the other, aspects of his own inner personality (Jung, 1959). For example, if a manager himself tends to withhold information from others as a tactic for gaining power, he may suspect these same motives of a coworker who seems not to be fully sharing information. Third, a person will behave with, and perceive, another in ways linked to her own "group identities" as these relate to the group identities of the other (Alderfer, 1977). For example, the relationship between a young Asian female manager and an older white male manager will reflect dynamics having to do with age, race, and gender. Fourth, a person occupies at different times a number of organizational and social roles. His behavior and response to another will be influenced by the role he and the other are occupying in the particular interaction or situation. For example, two individuals who outside the office are tennis buddies may be superior and subordinate in the workplace—or vendor and customer. They will interact differently in the workplace than they do over a beer—though their relationship in each setting will be influenced by their relationship in the other setting.

Furthermore, since we are trying to understand how a person has developed over time, we must deal with the additional layer of variation in behavior and perception introduced by the dimension of time. When we investigate a life, we are asking for interpretations or recollections of something that happened any time from one second ago to several years ago. As Vaillant discovered, "It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturation makes liars of us all" (1977, p. 197). Changes in recollections over time can provide us with useful data. Erikson (1968, 1969) suggests that a person's subjective interpretation of an event or behavior is influenced by, and can therefore illuminate, several factors: the person's life stage, needs, and concerns at the time the event occurred and at the time he recollects the event, which lead him to selectively experience and reconstruct the event in a particular way; the role of that event and the recollection of it in the person's life history; the circumstances of the community or culture at the time the event occurred and when it is recalled; and the role of that event and the recollection in the community's history.

Erikson refers to all these forces as "relativity," and argues that any person's perceptions and recollections in a biographical inquiry will be unique and must be interpreted in light of how they are shaped by the forces of relativity. The nature of a person's recollections of family, relationships, and experiences through his life can tell us about his current concerns and preoccupations, especially when his recollections are juxtaposed with the contrasting recollections of others looking back on those same relationships and experiences.

8. The researcher investigating personality becomes part of the inquiry.

The researcher studying personality issues has no choice but to be drawn into the investigation because relativity applies to her as well. She herself has a personality and inner needs, to which her approach to the work is linked. She forms a relationship with the subject, has reactions to the subject, and influences the subject in conducting the inquiry. She and the subject are continually responding and reacting to each other. The importance of taking into account the "observer's" effect on the phenomenon of personality suggests the desirability of a clinical approach, in which the researcher is not an "observer" but rather a participant in the phenomenon being studied, and in which consequently there is "... commitment to a process of self-scrutiny by the researcher as he or she conducts the research" (Berg & Smith, 1985, p. 25).

Guidelines for Biographical Inquiry

The principles of the biographical method are based on, and indeed are intended to parallel, the above-described conceptual framework of personality and behavior.

1. Gather multiple perspectives.

As we suggested earlier, we can take advantage of the complexity in behavior and perception. There are variations in perceptions on the part of our subject, others who know him, and ourselves the researchers. Rather than undermining our ability to collect valid data and shape a coherent portrait of the person, they can help us to gain yet a deeper understanding of him. In order to utilize the variation, we must gather many perspectives on the person: from the person himself, from others having a range of relationships with him at varying points in time, and even from multiple researchers. Then we can use the variations in perceptions and behavior to make interpretations about the person's character. In other words, the patterns of variation and similarity across observers become data in themselves. This is our primary tool for understanding the individual, and for maintaining rigor in the pursuit of that understanding.

The use of multiple perspectives to create a multifaceted portrait is a departure from most intensive studies of lives, which focus primarily on self-description (such as Vaillant, 1977; White, 1966; Levinson et al., 1978). In contrast, biographers (see, for example, Maurois, 1930; Edel, 1959) rely to a large extent on the reports of others regarding their subject. In part, this is because their subjects are no longer living, and also because biographers believe that different perceptions "are valuable only insofar as they are put face to face with each other and with the complete picture of the man's personality" (Maurois, 1930, p. 87).

Let us look in turn at how we can use three different kinds of perspectives: that of the subject, those of the acquaintances, and those of the researchers themselves.

The subject. As we have seen, a person inevitably reveals different aspects of himself to different others. And he inevitably sees himself subjectively, relative to his own desires for himself. These desires become even more salient when he finds himself the object of inquiry. Subjective views and wishes may influence his motivation to take part in the study, and also influence how he presents himself to us, the researchers. In the case of our action research with managers, for example, a person may have reached a dead end in his career, and use his participation in the study to convince us and others of his worthiness for promotion. We do not suggest the the subject is consciously or intentionally being deceptive. Rather, we believe that every person presents to the world a particular "persona," which he strives to see as his true self; at the same time he hides from the world and himself his "dark" or unwanted side (Jung, 1959). The researcher's job is to recognize the person's self-presentation as a picture of his persona, of how he wants to see himself and appear to others, and to try more fully to understand the motives and needs that lie behind the face he puts on for the world. In this light, autobiographies or other forms of self-report can be useful to us, not in providing us with the objective and ultimate "truth," but rather in illuminating how the individual constructs himself and his world.

The acquaintances. When we talk to an acquaintance about our subject, we must remain aware that she sees our subject through the unique lenses of her own personality. Though we may not choose to delve deeply into each acquaintance's life, we can use what we know of her character and her relationship with the subject to understand why she might portray the subject as she does. Then, as we gain a wide range of acquaintances' perspectives and consider the possible factors operating in each relationship, we can seek to understand what underlies the similarities and differences in those various perceptions. Differences in perception between subgroups of acquaintances, for example, may reflect elements of the subject's character that lead to distinctive relationships with each of these subgroups, so we need to explore what those who share perceptions have in common in terms of their group identities or relationships with the subject. Seemingly contradictory perceptions, rather than representing dilemmas to be resolved or explained away, may reflect different and conflicting aspects of the individual in question, which can be illuminated by exploring the nature of the relationships evoking those contradictory perceptions.

Variations and similarities must be considered in the context of time, as well. If we talk to others who have known the subject at varying points in history, it becomes possible to see ways in which his personality has remained stable through the different life stages, and ways in which he has developed and changed.

The researchers. Perhaps the biggest challenge to us as biographical researchers is to understand our own lenses—the identities, needs, and agendas we bring to the inquiry. Subjectivity enters into every phase of a research endeavor, especially one that involves personal relationships. Just as the biographical subject's work reflects her own inner needs and emotions, so too does the work of the biographer (Baron & Pletsch, 1985). Right from the start, from the very choice of subject and focus, our work serves not only our espoused scientific, artistic, or literary purpose, but also the personal purpose of helping us to confront and resolve our own issues and conflicts.

For example, the literary biographer André Maurois describes how he chose to study the lives of Shelley and Disraeli. As a student of philosophy in his youth, Maurois had aspired to live his life as a logical system. In denying the emotional and nonrational side of himself, though, he had caused suffering to himself and others. When he became familiar with the life of the poet Percy Shelley, Maurois recognized in Shelley's life evidence of the inner conflict he himself felt between logic and romanticism. "To tell the story of his life would be in some measure a deliverance for myself . . . I wanted to kill the romantic in me; and, in order to do it, I scoffed at it in Shelley" (1930, pp. 121-122). But since Shelley had died young, this "resolution" through biography was incomplete for Maurois as he grew older. He next wanted to know what happens to a romantic like himself later in life. How does one reconcile "the dreams of youth with a life of action" (1930, p. 124). In Disraeli he found a man struggling with this dilemma. By immersing himself in Disraeli's life, he could vicariously experience Disraeli's achievements: "Being unable . . . to lead a life of political activity myself, I took a passionate pleasure in joining in the struggle by donning the mask of a face that appealed to me" (1930, p. 125). Maurois speaks from his own experience in asserting that biography is, to a great extent, autobiography in disguise.

In addition to influencing our choice of subject and focus, our identities and personal goals for undertaking the research also influence the kind of data we draw out of people, the explanatory hypotheses and interpretations we generate, the findings we attend to, and the conclusions we draw (Alderfer, 1985). Deep and partly unconscious personal reasons for the work may be inevitable, and in fact, they supply the energy and passion which inspire the labor involved. "It is perfectly possible to write a biography with the external and professional objectives operating at the conscious level, while much of the energy for carrying out the task stems from unconscious motives. The two function in tandem . . . [but] they may do so more effectively if the writer is aware of the unconscious motives at an early stage of the work" (Baron, 1985, p. 9). The responsible biographer will remain vigilant regarding her underlying needs and how they might be influencing the shape of the biographical portrait.

When we engage in biographical inquiry, we become immersed in our subject's life and work; we form an intimate relationship with our subject. Exploring that relationship, the emotional connections that form and shift throughout the research process, can help us to understand a subject's inner life. The relationship we form with the subject, our emotional responses to him, and our opinions and judgments about him, do more than reflect our needs as biographers. They also shed light on his character (Racker, 1968). This phenomenon is known as "countertransference." Vaillant noticed this parallel between subject's character and researcher's reactions in his study: "The men who had always found loving easy made me feel warmly toward them, and led me to marvel at both my tact and my skill as an interviewer . . . I left the office of one such man feeling ten feet tall; but he had had the same effect on others all his life. In contrast, men who had spent their lives fearful of other people and had gone unloved in return often made me feel incompetent and clumsy" (1977, p. 48). Yet we must walk a tightrope—on one hand allowing this identification and intimacy to develop, and using it to better understand our subject; but also maintaining enough critical detachment that our relationship with the individual does not come to take precedence over our quest for useful knowledge and scientific progress. This is a difficult balance to achieve, as I will discuss later.

It is also difficult sometimes to know, as a researcher, to what extent one's reaction to the subject is due to one's own relativity and to what extent it is due to characteristics of the subject. For this reason it is desirable to conduct biographical research in a team, with individual members varying in age, gender, race and ethnicity, background, and so on, with the best mix depending to some degree on the study's focus. Obtaining a broad range of views and reactions among the research team serves to provide a check on the subjectivity of individual perceptions. White found this strategy to be useful in his study of lives, commenting that members of the research team were "of somewhat different backgrounds and training [and] to a considerable extent . . . cancel[ed] each other's personal rigidities of judgment" (1966, p. 105). A varied team can also be deployed to gain desired kinds of information from the various acquaintances, depending on who those acquaintances are and what kinds of relationships researchers can form with them. For example, the more similar the interviewee and researcher, the easier it is to gain rapport.

In sum, because of the great extent to which subject, acquaintance, and researcher perceptions of a biographical subject are relative, each individual's perspective can only supply a single angle. Our attempt to construct a three-dimensional, lifelike representation of an individual can be likened to sculpting a statue: "A statue can be viewed from many different angles, and sketches from different angles supplement rather than conflict with each other" (Runyan, 1984, p. 35). Or we can think of our work as weaving a tapestry in which every perspective supplies a thread: The optimal biography is an "integrative" or "synthetic" one, recognizing a variety of perspectives and "weaving them into a more comprehensive and multifaceted representation of the life" (p. 36).

2. Use multiple methods.

Another way to gain a breadth of perspectives on the individual in question is to use a variety of methods and measures to supplement face-to-face interviews. Consider the biographer whose subject is no longer living: She still is able to gain a rich and empathic understanding of her subject by using written materials such as letters, diaries, and memos, and by immersing herself in the data regarding her subject's life, thus becoming "the surrogate for the consciousness that has been extinguished" (Edel, 1959, p. 76). With a living subject we can administer psychological instruments and projective measures to see how theoretical frameworks of personality can enlighten our understanding of him. For our purposes in studying management style, we can use paper-and-pencil surveys to collect coworker perceptions of his skills. We can observe him on the job to see how he spends his time and how he interacts with others. We can also look for data in small instances—slips of the pen, comments scribbled on questionnaires, inconsistencies in statements.

3. **Combine research and service.**

We believe that biographical work with managers benefits from being done in an action research mode. The biographical researcher is in a position to help with and encourage the self-awareness and growth of the managers she studies, by providing them with feedback about their managerial characteristics, and also by directly discussing possible avenues for change. Few of the existing studies investigating individual lives in depth have had development as a goal. But we see these goals of research and service as being complementary. One reason is that biography asks for a sizable time commitment and extraordinary access to a person's life, and the service aspect allows the researcher to offer the manager something in return for his participation. In addition, as we work with the manager to address his developmental needs, we can at the same time gain insight into the dynamics of development.

An Example of Biographical Inquiry: Using "BAR" to Study Executives' Character and Development

Next, I would like to show how these principles and guidelines played out in an actual biographical inquiry, the study of executive character and development introduced earlier. The reader will recall that we were seeking to study each individual executive in the context of his role, to answer three questions:

1. What is the executive's style? What are his characteristics as a leader and manager, both strengths and weaknesses?

2. What are the executive's developmental needs? In what ways could he stand to develop, to become more effective in carrying out his role?

3. What forces influence the likelihood and course of such development? In what ways is development deterred by the nature of the executive's personality, role, relationships, and environment, and in what ways is it facilitated?

The specific form of biographical inquiry we developed to study these questions is called Biographical Action Research, or "BAR" (Kaplan, Kofodimos, & Drath, 1987; Kofodimos, 1987). BAR consists of two general phases: Diagnosis (entry, data collection, and data analysis) and Development (feedback, action planning, and change). We will demonstrate the process using the case of Frank Lindler. (For a fuller description of the case of Lindler, see Kofodimos, Kaplan, and Drath, 1986.)

Diagnosis

Entry. We generally make initial contact with potential subjects through our network of managers and training and development professionals who know of executives interested in pursuing their own development. Sometimes executives participating in training programs at the Center for Creative Leadership become interested in further self-understanding and development, in which case they are referred to us. Sometimes others in the organization initiate the process, for any number of reasons: One executive was referred to us because he was a very strong and capable leader in many ways, but there were significant problems in his management style that hampered his overall effectiveness and threatened to derail his progress. In contrast, Frank Lindler was not in trouble: He was a successful and high-potential young executive interested in learning about himself and improving his effectiveness as he faced increasing responsibilities and challenges. We found Lindler through a management development specialist in his company who knew of our work and thought Lindler would be interested in helping us, in return for useful feedback.

As in Lindler's case, we find a liaison for each of our executives, usually from the training and development function of the company, who serves as our contact person and advocate throughout the project. After discussing the project with the executive and verifying his interest, the liaison arranges for an initial entry meeting, attended by the executive and the research team, and sometimes also by the liaison. In this meeting, we elicit the executive's wishes and needs for the study, and we explain the general sequence of activities. We emphasize the applied nature of the project: Although we expect to obtain research data from the study, the executive's primary benefit in participating is that we offer him an opportunity to learn about himself and improve his effectiveness as a leader and manager.

Two important issues must be discussed in the entry meeting: confidentiality and publication. It is necessary, for the validity and usefulness of the data and the security of the executive, that we work with the executive under conditions of privacy and confidentiality. We only share information with others in the organization—including our liaison—when the executive chooses to do so; the executive controls what information is shared, how, and with whom. We expect to publish our findings, however, so we must come to an agreement about our right to use the research data in our writing. Since this work involves detailed case studies, we agree at entry that if and when we write about our work with this individual, we will create and gain his approval for a disguise that protects his privacy without compromising our research goal.

In addition to this initial entry meeting, we must go through an entry process with every individual whom we interview about the executive. Before the interviews, the executive meets with these respondents as a group or individually. He describes the project and explains that we will ask them to talk candidly with us about their experience of him, and that their openness will contribute greatly to his learning. In addition, at the beginning of each interview, the interviewer repeats a brief description of the study and explains our stand regarding the interviewee's anonymity and confidentiality. We explain that we intend to provide the executive with a written feedback report which includes quotes from interviewees to illustrate the various issues raised. When we began this work, our pledge of confidentiality was that all information would be fed back to the executive in aggregate form. For instance, we would cluster together the perceptions of all subordinates, or all peers, or all members of a particular functional group, such as the marketing staff. We promised that no quotes or statements likely to identify individuals would appear in the feedback report. But we discovered that it was difficult for us to anticipate which phrases or stories the executive might recognize as coming from a particular source. Consequently, we have begun asking the interviewee to take responsibility for her own statements: Anything she tells us becomes a potential quote—though the individual's name will not be attached to it—unless she identifies a particular story or statement as "off the record." For bosses and family members, we tell them we will attach their name to their quotes, both because their perspective will be unique and easily identifiable anyhow, and because the executive may want to give special attention to their responses. After these explanations and before beginning the interview, the interviewer also elicits and responds to any concerns or questions the interviewee might have.

We try to remain especially careful about the study's image in the organization, so that it is not seen either as a plum for fast-trackers or as a remedial course for managers in trouble, because either image can undermine the motivation to participate for the sake of self-learning. And we try to emphasize the primacy of our relationship with the executive over that with the organization, and the importance we place on adhering to the principles of confidentiality, so that there is no fear that our data will fall into the hands of other organizational members, such as decision-makers on executive succession. Issues of privacy and confidentiality turn out to be very thorny, and we will return to them later.

Data Collection. Our methodology calls for in-depth data collection on each executive we study. For each executive, we spend a total of 70 to 80 hours collecting data in the Diagnostic phase, and occasionally that much again in the Development phase, which also provides us with data. The interview is our primary vehicle for collecting data. We conduct interviews on several topics: managerial approach, career history, personal life, childhood, and development. We use an interview schedule for each topic, but the interview questions are open-ended, and we maintain a flexible approach to using them, diverging when an unexpected tangent seems appropriate to follow. In later interviews, we focus more specifically on issues that emerged in our earlier, more exploratory interviews.

Our choice of interview topics reflects the principles of personality laid out earlier. For example, we interviewed Frank Lindler about his personal life, and learned about his family, his community involvement, and his leisure activities. It turned out to be useful to investigate Lindler's patterns of involvement in the community, because his heavy, even compulsive involvement in community volunteer work paralleled the way he threw himself into his job. Similarly, it was important to investigate his family relationships, because the quality of his relationships with wife and children directly related to the role that work played in his life and how he approached it: His marital relationship was unsatisfying, and he used his work relationships to meet his needs for relatedness. However, one reason his marriage was not working was that it was very difficult for him to be vulnerable and close with others, including his wife. Thus, focusing on work relationships allowed him to associate (without becoming intimate) with people who respected him for his accomplishments and were unaware of his vulnerabilities. The parallel we found between his interpersonal distance and invulnerable demeanor at work, and those same qualities at home, helped us see his general defense against intimacy, a defense that limited the depth of knowledge others acquired about him and thus limited the feedback they could give him.

We ask the executive about his past: his family of origin, childhood experiences, and relationships in youth and throughout his life. On our list of others to be interviewed we include people who knew the executive at different points in his past. This might include parents, siblings, childhood friends, college chums, and colleagues from early worklife. In the case of Lindler, we found that his relationship with his parents helped to explain much of his current behavior. His interpersonal distance at work derived in part from the nonintimate nature of his relationship with his parents. His high needs for mastery and respect were rooted in their subtle pressures and expectations for achievement and excellence, and the lack of clear praise for meeting those expectations. These aspects of Lindler's relationship with his parents were evidenced by Frank's own testimony, the testimony of old friends, and our direct interaction with his parents.

As we collect this sometimes sensitive data regarding the individual's personal life and childhood, we need him to feel free to share himself with us—to talk candidly and to allow us to interview others who will also talk candidly. To do this, we need to build a relationship of mutual trust. This takes time. We find that by the fifth or sixth interview the executive is disclosing information about himself that he would not, and did not, disclose to us in the first or second interview. For example, when we first knew Lindler, he described his parents as proud, respectful, and supportive of him. Not until we had known Frank for several months did he acknowledge that he felt unsupported by his parents in his youth and that this had affected his self-esteem and feelings of competence, which in turn led him to seek to outdo what he saw as their undervaluation of his abilities and potential. Another example is related to Frank's initial presentation of himself as having been an obedient and nonrebellious adolescent. It took a year for us to learn (from others) about his mildly delinquent (drinking, dating, and partying) activities in high school. Further, in both of these examples, not only is it useful for us to learn the information that has been held back, but the very fact that Frank withheld these particular pieces of data also provides us with clues regarding his character. For example, we gather that part of the image Frank hopes to portray is that of a wholesome and obedient "good son," while his rebellion remains cloaked and compartmentalized.

It is not realistic to hope for complete objectivity in our view of the executive. Rather, we seek to gain insight by understanding how the relationship we form with him influences our feelings and opinions about him. As our relationship with the executive builds throughout the study, we inevitably identify with certain characteristics we find desirable. For example, as researchers we identified with Lindler's intellectual bent and his high need for achievement. In fact, we frequently communicated with him by giving him copies of articles on management, ostensibly because this would be consistent with his mode of learning about the world, but also because this was a way we ourselves liked to learn.

The research team and the executive influence one another. We influence the executive by working with him, asking him to think about particular issues and events, guiding his self-perceptions in certain directions, simply making him more reflective. Sometimes there are unanticipated changes. During the time of our work with Frank, he made some major changes in his life—a divorce, a job change, an overseas move—as well as smaller changes in his managerial style. Some of these changes can be directly attributed to the development work we did with him, but others were the result of Frank's overall increasing self-awareness.

We changed, too, as we thought about ourselves in relation to him, and as we thought about our reactions to his personality and his work. As we got to know Frank, our feelings about him changed from extremely positive, when we were at first impressed by his smoothly polished surface, to quite critical, when we began to discover that the smooth surface covered flaws and we felt perhaps a bit betrayed. Eventually we came to a balanced view; we saw a human, although by many standards a very effective one, with virtues and failings like all other humans. This evolution has influenced our perspective on the other executives we are studying by making us more aware that our perception of character is influenced by the maturity of our relationship with the person, and by helping us to anticipate the likely nature of phases in our feelings toward our subjects.

As we have indicated, we also talk with the executive's colleagues, family members, and friends. For example, we asked Frank Lindler to give us a list of such people who knew him in different ways and could therefore give us a range of perspectives. We talked with about a dozen current coworkers, superiors, subordinates, and peers. We talked with several coworkers from Frank's previous job. We talked with his wife, personal friends from various times in his life, and his parents. And, indeed, we heard a wide range of opinions. For example, we found that Frank was consistently seen in a more favorable light by his superiors than by his subordinates. Because several superiors shared the same favorable perceptions and several subordinates shared a more critical one, we felt it unlikely that the difference in perception was due primarily to perceiver idiosyncrasies; rather, it seemed likely that Frank behaved differently toward superiors than he did toward subordinates. Using information we had from his own self-reports in combination with the interviews with others, we surmised that Frank's presentation of certain favorable aspects of himself to superiors reflected his persona, the way he wanted to be seen and to see himself. That he was presenting this side of himself to superiors was indicative of the importance he placed on the perceptions of superiors and other authority figures. The picture of himself he was painting for his superiors represented not just the way he would like to be seen, but the way he would like to actually be: intelligent, obedient but iconoclastic, ambitious, and honorable.

With the benefit of our information from Frank's life history, we saw that his desire to please authority figures harkened back to his youth as an only child growing up in an environment of parents and grandparents and their friends. His perceptions of his superiors and his behavior toward them were influenced by their inevitable representation of earlier authority figures. In the same way that the image his parents and grandparents had of him shaped his self-image and self-esteem, so too do the opinions his superiors have of him now.

Much of what Frank told us in early interviews, much of the so-called factual information we recorded in our notes, was tempered by his desire to present to us the picture of an executive who was emotionally steady, confident, virtuous, and honorable—the same qualities which he portrayed to superiors. This led him to suppress certain information that might have damaged the persona, while emphasizing other information that supported it. Yet over time, as we talked further with him and others, we began to see evidence of contradictory elements such as self-doubt, volatility, and selfishness. Gradually we came to see that neither side was true or false. Rather, the dominant qualities were elements of his persona and the contradictory ones were elements of his dark side—rarely expressed or recognized by Frank, but equally a part of him. Our challenge was to determine what needs were met by the content of this particular persona and what was threatening about the content of the dark side.

The very subjectivity of the information we get from the executive thus helps to answer one of our research questions. The executive's attitude toward growth and change influences his response to our effort to understand him. By understanding the executive's response to our investigation, by looking for patterns in what is withheld and what is disclosed, we can gain insight about his orientation toward his own development and how that orientation is linked to basic needs. In general, Lindler was a learner, open to our project and to information about himself. When he withheld information that was inconsistent with the characteristics of his desired persona, when he systematically failed to tell us about his youthful rebellions, or his self-doubts, or his mistakes, or his anger, we made inferences about why he was unwilling or unable to acknowledge these things about himself. Furthermore, the subjectivity of his self-perception would have to be taken into account in our attempts to be of help to him. As long as certain aspects of self were denied, they could not be addressed by developmental efforts: The developmental pursuit would thus have to involve reshaping or broadening his self-perception.

We supplement the information gained through interviews in several ways. A team member spends a few days with the executive at work, observing and recording his behavior and interactions. We obtain information from coworkers (including an expanded circle not reached by interview) by means of written questionnaires measuring leadership and management skills. We ask the executive to fill out psychological instruments such as the Myers-Briggs, FIRO–B, Adjective Check List, and others, depending on his particular wishes and circumstances—for example, we gave the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory and Career Anchors Inventory to one executive who was considering a career change.

The test scores can be illuminating as supplements to the interview data. For example, we suspected that Frank's need to control others and his environment was stronger than he admitted, and that this was the reason why his style with subordinates was so inconsistent, swinging between his desired nondirectiveness, and his occasional outbursts of challenge and attack. His FIRO-B Control scores (8-Expressed and 1-Wanted), showing that he liked to take charge almost all of the time, and that he did not at all like to accept the influence of others, supported our hypothesis.

We also take advantage of special opportunities to obtain data. For one executive who attended a workshop at the Center, we had the results of a battery of a dozen or so tests which were administered for purposes of the workshop, and which he made available to us. Another executive, who characteristically communicated by memo in his organization, had documented his worklife by saving every memo he wrote, as well as written communication he received, all ordered chronologically and bound in notebooks. Sifting through these provided us with interesting glimmers into the texture of his life at work.

Data Analysis. The nonlinear quality of the data analysis process in biography is described by Leon Edel: "[The biographer] is called upon to take the base metals that are his disparate facts and turn them into the gold of the human personality . . . [and] no chemical process has yet been discovered by which this change can be accomplished" (1959, pp. 8-9). With that caveat in mind, data analysis occurs at a number of levels. Our objective for the feedback report is to create a number of categories or themes which reflect the executive's typical style and impact on others, both in the workplace and in his family. Meanwhile, at a deeper level, we are looking for the implicit unifying personality issues which these themes suggest. These underlying issues will inform our approach to the feedback and development process, and also provide feedstock for our own theory development.

As data collection proceeds, we continually record our ideas, hypotheses, and emerging patterns. Sometimes, to help clarify our thoughts, we use the tactic of copying ideas and salient quotations onto cards, and then moving the cards around into "clumps" representing possible major themes or hypotheses. Our approach is at the same time inductive and deductive: We immerse ourselves in the data and stir around within it, looking for conceptual themes to emerge. And we also begin with certain categories, reflected in the structured interview questions, which reflect dimensions that we think are important to understanding executives and executive work. The categories are broad enough, however, to incorporate emergent themes linked to each executive's unique characteristics. For example, in the interview regarding managerial approach, we ask about the executive's approach to strategy formulation, his style of delegating decision-making authority, and his relationships with different groups of coworkers. In the case of Lindler, the analysis of coworker responses yielded categories related to these general areas, but grounded also in the salient aspects of Lindler's style: his nondirective style, his tendency to challenge and attack subordinates, his thorough decision-making style, the high esteem in which he was held by superiors, his obsession with work to the exclusion of his personal life.

Meanwhile, we were developing a theoretical framework regarding Frank, focusing on the two underlying drives that unified these behavioral patterns: the striving for mastery and the avoidance of intimacy, both of which, we hypothesized, supported an idealized and illusory self-image he was trying to live up to. This framework was not part of the feedback report, and in fact it was not even a fully formed idea at the time we gave Frank that report. Rather, it was an embryonic idea which we kept in the back of our minds, and, through Frank's response to the feedback and to the further work we did with him, we were able to gather more data which in combination with data from other executives led to elaboration of the idea into a full blown theoretical framework. (For a fuller discussion, see Kofodimos, 1989.)

We repeat this process with each of our subjects, letting our themes and hypotheses emerge from, and correspond to, the unique characteristics of each person. Each of our studies, like a biography, "should take its form from its material" (Edel, 1959) rather than from our pre-existing theories and predispositions. In this respect, we subscribe to the notion of "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Insights emerge from wrestling with unstructured data, rather than from testing explicitly stated a priori hypotheses. Here a delicate balance is involved. We want to build our understanding from one executive to the next—but we do not want to inappropriately apply principles from one executive's life to the next executive.

Throughout data collection and analysis, we constantly try to look into ourselves to understand the executive and his development. We explicitly recognize our subjectivity and try to take it into account in every aspect of the study. We are mindful that our perspective on the research is influenced by our identity and our individual and group agendas for undertaking the study (Alderfer, 1985).

The fact that there are three of us on the core research team (plus more in the extended group) allows us to use the variation in our own perspectives to explore the varying aspects of the executive's personality which our own individual identities evoke. For example, I, the sole woman on the team, became aware that I felt a certain ambivalence regarding Lindler: on one hand, the inclination to protect him from the pain of discoveries about himself, and on the other hand the opposing inclination to break down his defenses and expose his vulnerability. I knew this ambivalence related to a degree to my own personality and needs, but why were these particular issues evoked with Lindler? I was to find that my reactions to Lindler reflected the nature of his relationships with women in general. I found this by interviewing other women in his life—wife, mother, friends, coworkers. They were remarkably candid and emotionally expressive, and they told deeply personal stories regarding their sometimes difficult experiences with Lindler. Identifying with these women by virtue of my own life experiences, I also felt anger and frustration with Lindler, similar to the anger and frustration they described. Furthermore, they too described their conflicting feelings—seeing and wishing to protect a fragility they sensed under his surface, but also impatient with and wanting to break down his self-protective walls. The important issue here is that our team came to understand this aspect of Lindler's relationships with women through his relationship with me, and my attempt to understand the feelings I was having toward Lindler and the women who knew him. We probably would not have attended to this dynamic, or gotten the kind of data we did from female interviewees, had the research team been all-male. Yet, we might not have been able to step back from the relationship between Lindler and me and make interpretations about Lindler based on it had not the male researchers been present to provide their contrasting perceptions of Frank and his relationships with women. Without those contrasting perceptions, I ran the risk of attributing to Frank a relationship with women that only existed with me, and of inaccurately projecting onto the interviewees attitudes and feelings which were only my own and not experienced by them at all.

As we try to make sense of the individual, we try to remain aware of the ways in which our values, as well as our personalities and inner conflicts, influence our interpretation of the data. Since we cannot remove our subjectivity, we must continually seek to understand how it influences our work and our conclusions. Early in our work with executives, for example, we took what we now see as an overly judgmental stance. We have come to understand this as a product of our own counterdependence toward these powerful figures, and we are now aware that we must continually watch for this potential influence on our interpretations, assumptions, and findings.

We must also remain aware that data analysis is a continuous process throughout data collection, not just at the end. We discovered a naturally occurring and, as it turned out, dangerous desire to make "sense" of our subject early in the investigation. We would characterize our subject as being a particular kind of person, behaving in a particular kind of way: Then suddenly he might do something completely contradicting our characterization, or an acquaintance might describe him in terms which conflicted with our own characterization. For example, as we first knew Lindler, he seemed very consistent to us: calm, stable, emotionally even or measured. Then we heard a few others describe him as volatile. They recalled his occasional explosive outbursts of anger in meetings. We tried to resolve the paradoxes by explaining away the atypical behaviors or perceptions; we treated them as exceptions, reactions to exceptionally trying situations or particularly annoying subordinates. But as it turned out, the volatility occurred more frequently than that; it was just as real and important as the calm. By trying to make sense of Lindler quickly, we developed a characterization that was the product of the way he initially presented himself to us, or rather, the way he presented the side of himself that he wanted us to see—his "persona." What we came to realize, as we tried to decide what was "real," was that the persona was not Lindler's entire self, nor was it just a facade. And the dark side was neither the hidden "real" self, nor was it nonexistent or insignificant. The two contradictory sides were equally real, equally parts of Lindler, discrepant as they were.

Our tendency to prematurely crystallize Lindler's portrait was a function of our need for sense-making. In our desire to feel we understand the truth about a person, and in our discomfort in allowing ambiguity and contradiction to exist, we are at risk of being lured by the oversimplification of the persona. Our natural wish to explain away Lindler's paradoxes so that he would "make sense" led us to oversimplify him in our own minds. Consequently, we learned to remain alert for seeming paradoxes. As we obtained multiple perspectives, we had to keep our emerging characterizations flexible and be ready to accept the coexistence of multiple views, seemingly conflicting but equally and simultaneously valid. We came to accept seeming contradictions in a person's character as normal, fundamental, and universal.

Though we have emphasized the complex and subjective nature of the process of data analysis and synthesis, this emphasis should not obscure the necessity of approaching this work with rigor. This rigor, however, must be appropriate to the nature of the work. Alderfer (1985) refers to the special kind of rigor that can be obtained by using multiple perspectives and methods, and by maintaining a self-analytic posture, as "disciplined subjectivity." Subscribing to the notion that there are multiple perspectives on truth "does not mean that one ignores evidence or throws out procedures of critical inquiry, but rather that empirical evidence and logical inference are employed within the context of a particular perspective" (Runyan, 1984, p. 38). For example, it is quite possible that a particular pattern of behavior demonstrated by an executive may have both psychological and cultural explanations; behavior is often "overdetermined," having multiple causes and meanings. Thus, Frank Lindler's lopsided focus on work and neglect of family may be both rooted in his own psychological functioning and reinforced by organizational pressures. BAR is ideally equipped to provide such multiple explanations. We do not claim to have the omniscience or the power to get at ultimate truth regarding the needs, desires, and goals of individuals—we do not even believe that there necessarily exists one such ultimate truth. All lies within the domain of relativity. By exposing and juxtaposing alternate perceptions and interpretations, we can uncover underlying assumptions and forces, and we can gain a broader, deeper, and more useful view than with any single perspective. But we do not intend to uncritically accept all possible interpretations. We need to evaluate alternative hypotheses on the basis of their logical soundness, the adequacy with which they account for the evidence, and their consistency with the evidence and with other hypotheses. The explanations—multiple or not—that pass the tests of plausibility and consistency will survive.

How do we do this concretely? For example, how do we look at an individual's self-report as raw material for higher-order interpretation? Let's look at a statement Lindler made regarding the breakup of his marriage: "I feel fine about it." When we heard this, it seemed unbelievable. We asked ourselves whether he was telling the truth, or merely hiding his anger or his upset. But how could it be? How could he be unbothered by the breakup of his marriage? We hadn't thought he was so callous as to feel fine rather than sad, or guilty, or lonely, or ambivalent. Uncertain regarding the "truth" about what Frank's statement signified, we looked at other evidence. We heard people talk about his emotional control, his appearance of invulnerability, his avoidance of awkward feelings. We heard him talk freely about the circumstances in which he felt strong, happy, and confident. In contrast, though we saw some circumstances where Lindler might be feeling weak, sad, or vulnerable, he was not quick to acknowledge or discuss such feelings.

From all this information, we hypothesized that "I feel fine" might mean that Lindler wanted to feel fine, that indeed he may have consciously felt fine, but that this may have been because he did not allow his "not-fine" feelings into consciousness. Thus, Lindler's claim to "feel fine" became data of primary interest to us not because of its face value, but rather because it represented an aspect of his self-presentation based in his motives and needs. His motives and needs, we realized, involved suppressing certain aspects of his dark side such as guilt or sadness. This view allowed us to go beyond deciding whether he was telling the truth or lying. We were able to see how he was both telling the truth (consciously) *and* lying (to himself).

The notion that strengths and weaknesses are likely to be linked to each other and to personality characteristics helps us organize the data. For example, we found that Lindler was seen by many as being overly slow, theory-based, and analytic in his decision making; as freezing into a state of "analysis paralysis" when quick action was needed. But that same decision-making style was a part of the reason why top management had chosen Lindler for his current position. The state of the business Lindler was running required the thorough problem assessment and innovative business solutions which Lindler's decision-making style produced. Lindler acknowledged that his decision-making style was founded on a need to be "right" and a dread of being wrong. He abhorred making mistakes because he then risked the loss of the respect and admiration of others (a fear rooted in his youth, when he feared losing the esteem of his parents by violating their expectations).

This example also raises the issue of the role of the executive's environment in reinforcing his style. Lindler's superiors encouraged and rewarded the positive aspects of his thorough decision-making style. We also found that Lindler's surroundings rewarded his rationality, analytic competence, and an invulnerable demeanor, and discouraged the expression of vulnerability, emotion, and intimacy. Frank's discomfort in these latter areas was contributing to problems in his personal life, but the organizational rewards attached to being invulnerable, unemotional, and nonintimate proved to be deterrents to change. Frank's subordinates, for example, did not want him to show more vulnerability and self-doubt—they wanted to be comforted by and reliant on his confidence. Since Frank valued affirmation and respect by the organization, the subtle pressures to emphasize the invulnerable and rational side and suppress the emotional side compounded his own inner inclination to do so, and made it unlikely that he would go against organizational value systems in order to make the changes that would improve his personal life.

Development

The "action" in Biographical Action Research involves presenting the feedback report to the executive; helping him to absorb the data and make meaningful connections; drawing implications regarding desirable changes in his behavior and working with him to plan those changes; and monitoring and coaching him through the process of change. The objectives of the development process are to help the executive and to learn about the dynamics of change in executive style and character.

Feedback. To prepare for the development phase, we construct a feedback report based on our data analysis. The report consists of interview data on the executive's leadership style and impact on others, patterns in his family life and childhood, and the results and interpretations of psychological instruments and coworker surveys. The feedback report to Frank Lindler contained several inductively derived categories for characterizing his leadership style, with each category and its subcategories illustrated by a number of quotations from Lindler and his coworkers. The major categories in the report were:

1. Image in the organization
2. Work relationships
3. Use of authority and delegation
4. Decision-making and problem-solving style
5. Approach to conflict
6. Dealing with emotions
7. Attitude toward work, career, and family

To take an example, within the "Decision-Making Style" category there were a number of subcategories such as "Slow to Decide," "Thorough," "Logical Thinker," and "Promotes Consensus." For "Slow to Decide," supporting quotes included, "He sometimes waits too darn long before he makes a decision. It's frustrating," and "He likes to follow protocol, question, probe, make every decision perfect."

In addition to an analysis of interviews with people at work, the report includes the results from psychological instruments and coworker surveys. And the report also includes our analysis of perceptions, with supporting quotations, regarding the executive away from work and the relation of his private life and work life.

After we go over the report with the executive privately, we determine with him the steps regarding its use. The basic ground rule is that the executive controls further distribution of the report. In some cases, the agreement with the executive and the organization calls for sharing with the executive's superior some summary of the main developmental needs identified by the study. The executive needs privacy so that he can enter freely into the learning experience, but the upshot of the study may need to be made available to other individuals who are interested in furthering the executive's development. One way we frequently handle the pressure to provide data to the organization is to let the executive write his own summary memo about the key points of the feedback received, and later, the key points in his development plan.

Following the private feedback session, a meeting or meetings with the executive's colleagues may be held. The purpose is to clarify the findings, which, because they are presented in general terms and on an aggregated basis, may be more helpful as a guide to change if they are grounded in concrete instances in particular relationships. How many group sessions we hold, and with what groups, varies with the executive. In Lindler's case, there were feedback sessions with three groups of subordinates. In each session he summarized those findings he wanted to discuss with the particular group, left the room so that the group could address the issues freely, and then returned for a discussion of the issues. The group sessions reinforced some of the things that came out in the report, including the perceived need for him to get out of his office and interact informally with staff and his tendency to question people aggressively when challenged. For example, Lindler met with a group of subordinates two levels down from him, with whom he had a poor relationship. The session cleared the air and resulted in a joint decision that Lindler and the subordinates would each take certain specific actions to improve the relationship.

The feedback sessions provide additional data on the executive for purposes of action and research. Feedback meetings are especially useful in illuminating the forces influencing development. For example, we can see evidence of the executive's defense mechanisms in his response to feedback in the meeting. We can also notice when subordinates withhold criticism, or when their criticism influences the executive counterproductively. With Frank Lindler, we saw in a feedback session our first direct evidence of something subordinates had described: his use of a challenging, argumentative style to defend, by counterattack, against criticism he received.

We enter into the feedback sessions with our hypotheses regarding the deeper unifying forces in the executive's personality half-formed and implicit. We do not articulate these hypotheses explicitly to the executive, because we do not think such confrontational measures would be helpful. Instead, we see the session as an opportunity to hold a mirror up to the executive showing him others' perceptions of his behavior and psychological instruments' perceptions of his personality. Based on these reflected data we work with the executive to suggest unifying statements or interpretations. As researchers, we use the events of the feedback session to test and refine the hypotheses we walked in with.

Action planning. After the feedback in its various forms, the executive has usually arrived at some focus on a few problems that he wishes to correct or strengths he wants to leverage. Working with the executive, we tailor a plan for change based on his needs. The change he makes may simply be to take a weakness into account, so that he might work around it or rely on coworkers whose strengths complement his weakness. Or he may choose to make concrete behavioral changes designed to increase an underdeveloped capacity or to stop a self-defeating behavior. We believe that changing style involves addressing the deep roots of that style in personality and history. We work with the executive to address the inner and environmental forces perpetuating the existing style and to pair behavioral change with self-insight and personal growth. Here again, how the executive plans these actions reflects aspects of his character. For example, one executive whose problem was explosive expressions of anger suggested that he could solve the problem simply by keeping a tighter lid on his emotions. But as we saw it, this approach to handling his emotions was precisely why his inner anger had a tendency to build up and explode. We worked with him to explore this issue.

Though the particular tactics for action planning vary from case to case, there are some concrete guidelines. We try to enlist relevant others (such as boss, spouse, liaison) to help plan and to provide ongoing support and reinforcement for the desired change. We create structures or milestones to provide feedback on progress. And we aim to let the direction of change be determined by the executive's needs, not our own inclinations or skills. If the area of most beneficial change does not match our own skills, we hand off the actual change process to an appropriate third party who is more qualified to address the executive's needs.

Change. What became of Frank Lindler as an outcome of our work with him? As a direct result of the feedback sessions, he made some behavioral changes to respond to his subordinates' wishes that he be more accessible to them, and that he impose more structure on his nondirective mode of interacting with them. In addition, over the three years we worked with him, as we mentioned earlier, he divorced. He moved to Europe to take a new job. He remarried, and his new wife reported that he was changing, becoming more open and easy with intimacy. We think that the contribution of our work with him, in large part, was to provide added fuel and focus for changes that were brewing in Frank already.

With other executives, our involvement in the change process has been more extensive. A number of individuals have, through supportive but tough counseling, achieved insight regarding the productive and counterproductive consequences of their styles and the rootedness of their styles in their characters; based on those insights, they have moderated their managerial approaches substantially. (For a fuller description of the change process we use, and what we have learned from it about the dynamics of character development, see Kaplan, in press.)

The change process has not been without its rocky elements, and we have learned through encountering resistance the large extent to which the style-character structure is deep-rooted and fundamentally linked to an individual's defense mechanisms and identity. Successful change thus involves gaining and conveying appreciation and respect for the meaning an executive's character and style holds for him, and the constructive aspects of that character and style. Our job is not to crumble the character structure he has developed to cope with the world. Rather, our job is to hold a mirror up so he can see the impact of his behavior on others, both productive and counterproductive, and so he can reflect on the inner reasons for that behavior. Our premise is that when aspects of the executive's (or anyone's) inner self and needs remain unconscious, they can distort his approach to his work. Unwittingly, he may be acting to serve his own needs, to deal with his own inner conflicts, rather than to serve the organization's objective requirements. The primary step in executive development, then, is to help the executive consciously understand and accept that inner self (even the dark side), and consequently become free from its demands and able to act more flexibly and appropriately to the needs of the task. This, we believe, is the nub of responsible and effective leadership and the goal of our change process.

Cautions and Dangers

BAR is a powerful intervention into an executive's life. It is potentially highly effective for acquiring knowledge and helping the executive, but at the same time it demands considerable caution to prevent negative repercussions. For this reason, we have made a policy of including a licensed clinical psychologist on every team. The clinician helps us to monitor and manage the possible side effects of the work, in addition to bringing skills in self-analysis, interpretation of test and interview data, and feedback-giving. For example, the collecting of data alone can provoke a reaction by bringing previously unacknowledged feelings to the surface. An unforeseen example of this occurred as a result of an interview with one of Frank's friends. In the process of answering the interview questions, she became aware of her anger and disappointment regarding a particular situation in which, she felt, he had betrayed their friendship. Later, she expressed this to him, somewhat explosively, causing both herself and Frank some pain. Similarly, we have seen instances with unpopular executives in which, by giving disenfranchised subordinates license to talk about the executive's strengths and weaknesses, they build up a head of steam which must be managed constructively so it does not lead to mutiny.

For the executive, receiving the written feedback is a powerful experience, as he is confronted with others' perceptions, both critical and positive, of his style and his characteristics as a leader and as a person. Group feedback sessions are similarly potent, since the executive is faced with coworkers and perhaps even family members openly discussing his behavior and its effect on them.

The use of the data for research and publication has been perhaps the thorniest issue of all, for many reasons. First, our case studies for research purposes have gone beyond what is presented in the feedback, presenting clinical behavioral science interpretations of the executive's character. It can be awkward for both executive and researcher to present the executive with such an analysis of him. This awkwardness reflects the split nature of our role: The presentation of the analysis reveals us not just as practitioners concerned with helping him, but also as researchers interested in understanding him. The uncomfortable "split-ness" in the role has diminished as we have matured into this work, and become more accepting and appreciative of executives: Consequently, our analyses have become more sympathetic and less detached. We have begun to share our theoretical views with the executive on an ongoing basis, and our positions as helper and scientist have merged more closely. I suspect, though, that our roles of researcher and practitioner can never merge completely, and that there will always be a deep level of interpretation which is useful to articulate for research purposes, but which is not useful to confront the executive with.

Another thorny issue is this: We promise the executive that we will disguise his identity and that of his organization in any published description of him. We have discovered that this is a very difficult balance to strike: to change the specifics enough that people who know him do not recognize him, but not so much that it distorts the essence of his character. We give the executive the opportunity to review and approve the description of him before it is published. But this does not necessarily resolve the issue. Frank, for example, was exceedingly laissez-faire about the publication of his case study. It was "fine," and he didn't mind if coworkers recognized him. We feared that this response reflected Frank's own personality and inclinations to deny his anxiety, rather than necessarily reflecting his best interests. The report by no means condemned Lindler, but it examined his childhood and his inner motives and conflicts, and described his managerial weaknesses which, were Lindler to be recognized, might be seen by some organizational decision-makers as negative. (The same would be true, I would wager, with any of our case studies, if our view of an executive were to be contrasted with the idealized expectations and impersonal images which executives must live up to daily in their organizations. Indeed, the sensitivity of the privacy issue says a great deal about the role organizational values play in constraining personal development.) But recognizing the nature of these organizational values, we wanted the disguise to be as airtight as possible, and we did not trust our own judgment regarding the reliability of the disguise. We might, for example, think a particular quotation has been modified sufficiently, but the speaker might still recognize his own statement and realize who the subject of the study was. So we gave the paper to a confidante inside the organization (with Frank's approval). The confidante provided more conservative comments which guided us in improving the disguise. Even with these cautions, we worry that there may be no guarantee that the executive cannot be recognized. We have found no satisfying answer to the question of discharging our responsibility to the executive. One solution we have resorted to that sidesteps the anonymity issue is writing theme-based theoretical papers which contain bits of supporting material from several executives. The price we pay for using this approach is that it does not maximize the biographical impact of the work: Although the biographical approach is the source of the theories, the data cannot be fully presented in support of those ideas.

The above dilemmas arise when our loyalty to scientific objectives threatens our relationship with the executive. We have also found circumstances in which our loyalty to the executive can endanger the scientific integrity of our work. These circumstances occur when, in the course of our work, we come across sensitive information which might be severely damaging to the executive if it were included in a case description of him and recognized, even merely suspected, to be him. We are talking about such things as substance abuse, breach of ethics, and extramarital affairs. Since we cannot, as we have seen, guarantee that such recognition is impossible, we must leave out or somehow disguise these revelations. Yet, in withholding this information to protect the executive, our portrait may be left without key evidence regarding important aspects of the individual's character. If not actually misleading the reader as to the individual's character, the researcher may still produce an incomplete or less robust portrait lacking in evidence. We can only try to find a way to convey the underlying points that these pieces of information suggest about the individual's character, without presenting the damaging evidence itself.

The dilemmas outlined here are similar in kind to a challenge inherent in any action research work: balancing the requirements of providing service to a client and pursuing knowledge. The tension looms larger here because of the increased intensity of the relationship with an individual subject, and the increased extent to which she has revealed herself.

To create a disguise that protects without compromising a person's essence—and to capture the complexity of the person discovered through this process—is an extremely challenging task. It requires technical proficiency and also artistry to analyze, synthesize, and present the data in a way that balances scientifically valid findings with a coherent and readable portrait. In this respect, biography is a complex process involving not only science, but also art and craft. It is "scientific when it asks the sciences to elucidate whatever they can about the human being and his personality; an art when it uses language to capture human experience; and requiring all the craftsmanship an individual can command in mastering and disciplining himself to deal with material as rich and varied and mercurial as the mind of man" (Edel, 1959, p. 8). By using the artist's approach to paint a human portrait, we also seek to convey insight to the reader not only at the rational and intellectual level, but also at the emotional level: The reader understands by seeing himself in the portrait.

Benefits of BAR

The benefits we can gain by attempting biography—a complex enterprise with risks and dangers—are substantial in terms of achieving deep understanding and formulating new frameworks and perspectives. We have found BAR to be uniquely well suited to helping us gain insight into executives' developmental needs and the forces influencing their development.

First, we learn about behavior and style, strengths and weaknesses as a leader. The method's use of multiple perspectives overcomes the inevitable bias executives (and all of us) have regarding their own abilities and liabilities. Gathering information about personal life as well as work life allows us to see how leadership style and developmental issues play out in nonwork settings. And observation lets us witness actual behavior and effectiveness. BAR's emphasis on understanding the person holistically allows us to see an executive's character and behavior in configuration, as opposed to seeing them as separate elements. In the case of Frank Lindler, this led us to an understanding of his managerial style that tied together his consensual approach to decision making, his delegation of responsibility and authority, and his challenging style of questioning subordinates—all of which revolved around an aptitude for analytical thinking, a reluctance to exercise direct control, and a strong need to be right.

Second, we learn about inner character. The intensive method helps us gain unparalleled access to the executive's inner world. By investigating the executive's life history, we can learn about the building blocks of the past, the family relations and significant childhood events on which his character is built. We can develop hypotheses about inner needs driving external behavior, and we can further elaborate and test these hypotheses as our relationship with the executive becomes closer over time and the information shared becomes more personal. For example, in our interviews we discovered that Frank Lindler's parents treated him as a special child, that they held especially high expectations for him, particularly in regard to moral standards and principled behavior; as a result, he became a high achiever in school, was active in many organizations and clubs, and eventually became a child who was esteemed more by parents and authority figures than by peers. The outcome of this in Frank's executive character is that he places great importance on being highly respected, especially by authority figures, and he values being competent, exceptional, masterful, and worthy of praise. The downside is his tendency toward self-idealization, the magnification of his strengths in his own eyes, and the suppression of his awareness of his weaknesses.

Third, we learn about development. Many of the same features of BAR that enable us to understand developmental needs also help us to learn about how the forces affecting feedback and change operate: In particular, the Development phase of BAR allows us to see those forces operate as we try to help the person develop. We found with Frank Lindler, for example, that his confident demeanor tended to discourage others from giving him feedback because they saw him as being so secure that he had no need for help. On the other hand, the way he tended to treat subordinates as colleagues led them to see him as approachable and open to feedback, and thus this aspect of his style enhanced self-learning. Indeed we often saw the very aspects of character which shape behavior also play out in the individual's approach to development.

Fourth, we learn about the role of the environment in shaping character, and in encouraging and inhibiting various aspects of personal development. Our use of a person-centered approach does not imply that we assume all aspects of executive behavior are attributable to personal inclinations. Certainly to a large degree executive behavior is a function of disposition, but it is also influenced strongly by the situation, its values and pressures. For example, we found in a previous study that the executive's "elevated" position in the organization creates several obstacles to development (Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1985). But other factors, such as the particular organizational culture, play a part as well. We could see with Frank how his environment influenced the shape of his development. His superiors fostered his development by taking him under their wing and giving him feedback and guidance. On the other hand, the organizational culture supported and reinforced Lindler's intellectual and rational side, and discouraged his emotional side, thus hindering his development of qualities that would benefit him in his personal life. Since we have information about how the shape of an individual's life has changed as he has been a member of different organizations and roles, we can see how the demands of an executive role influence him, as well as how he shapes that role according to the meaning it has for him and the needs it meets. In other words, we can explore the mutual influences of personality and job demands, of character and social structure.

In sum, BAR has many benefits for depth of understanding of individual executives, their behavior, their character, their development, and the influence of their environment. And the insights we have gained through BAR also provide guidance for helping executives. We have learned that for the executive to really change how he behaves and how he affects others, he must come to terms with the roots of his behavior in his inner character. We have learned that for us to help the executive develop, we need to use his inner character to help us. As a function of his inner character, he will have particular reactions to confronting various aspects of his inner self and to making various behavioral changes. He will be receptive to insight and change in some respects, but in other respects will defend against it in an effort to protect dearly held inner structures and hidden areas. We have to respect the limits of change and insight the executive is ready to handle; these limits are to a large degree defined by his inner needs and conflicts.

But what about the wider benefits of advancing an understanding of executives in general? Runyan (1984) describes three goals of personality psychology: to understand what is true of *all* humans, to understand what is true of *groups* of humans, and to understand what is true for *individual* humans. There is order and meaning—and a need to develop generalizations—at all levels. In biography, our immediate priority is to achieve depth of understanding regarding the individual; we do this by generalizing across roles, relationships, time, and situations within the individual's life, to reach generalized insights about that individual. This is the "idiographic" use of biography. But Runyan's different levels of personality study are interdependent: Just as we use general theories about humans to help us understand an individual life, those building general theories about humans may be informed by the processes and phenomena of an individual's life. By delving down into the psyche of one person, we can obtain insights about that person which are not accessible through other methods. We can also use the depth of information regarding one individual to generate hypotheses which can be tested with other individuals. For example, through our work with Frank Lindler, we saw some patterns regarding his need to feel and appear competent and his fear of intimacy. In working with other executives, we found other kinds of patterns with similar aspects. Stepping back and looking at the several cases in unison allowed us to see overarching patterns. This is the "nomothetic" use of biography, in which we seek to understand the variance across cases. We have used BAR with over twenty executives and can now look at patterns of similarity and diversity to yield hypotheses in relation to executives in general.

We must be careful, however, regarding how far we can generalize. We can make some suppositions, for example, about managers in general, perhaps even adults in general, based on our limited sample of executives—because, after all, in some respects they are just a subset of managers and adults. But until we have looked at non-executive managers and adults we must stop at suppositions. Similarly, I am frequently asked whether the findings from BAR apply to female executives. We explicitly decided not to include women in our initial study, as we had so much difficulty finding women executives who wanted to participate in our study and whose companies were willing to pay for the project. We did not want to make generalizations about all female executives based on one or two, so we decided to wait until we could focus our efforts on working with many women executives. Since our subjects have been exclusively male, we can only suppose that in some ways male and female executives will be the same, and in other ways different. The list goes on: Our subjects are all white, U.S.-born, all between the age of thirty-five and sixty. Almost all are from *Fortune* 500 corporations. We can only say with confidence that our results apply to this subgroup of executives.

Since we first developed this method, many case studies have been conducted and used to understand a range of managerial phenomena. As an example, at a recent conference, a symposium was held to illustrate the range of topics that can be addressed with BAR. Presentations addressed the following topics:

• Executive expansiveness: the personality type which leads to success and effectiveness in the executive role, and also to some significant leadership weaknesses (Kaplan, 1989).

• Rational judgment: the roots of an executive's unique style of rational analysis and decision making in his personality (Drath, 1989).

• The transition to general manager: how aspects of an executive's personality play out as he faces the challenge of moving into the general management position (Ruderman, 1989).

• Emotional competence: how executives tend to lack skill and comfort with emotions and with understanding their impact on others, and how this gets in the way of their work effectiveness (Tavares, 1989).

• Imbalance: how an executive's personality underlies the way in which he manages the balance between work and personal life (Kofodimos, 1989).

Research is also underway regarding the link between an executive's character and his approach to strategy formulation and execution.

When we began, we did not foresee the wide range of issues and insights that would emerge from this work. The themes explored in the above-described symposium all had as their primary origin and impetus the patterns we repeatedly found in the case data. This suggests that the fruits of the biographical method have yet to be fully harvested.

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OUR VALUES

Our work should serve society. We expect our work to make a difference in the quality of leadership in the world. To that end, we try to discover what is most important to do, and focus our resources for the greatest, most enduring benefit. In doing this we continually remind ourselves of the inherent worth of all people. We consider it our responsibility to be attentive to the unique needs of leaders who are women or members of minorities. To make a difference in the world and to turn ideas into action, we must be pioneers in our field, contributors of knowledge, creators of solutions, explorers of ideas, and risk-takers in behalf of society.

Our mission and our clients deserve our best. We expect our service to our clients to be worthy, vigorous, resourceful, courteous, and reliable. In the pursuit of our mission, we intend to be a healthy, creative organization with the financial and inner resources needed to produce our best work. We require ourselves to abide by the highest professional standards and to look beyond the letter of professional guidelines to their spirit. This includes being forthright and candid with every client and program participant, scrupulously guarding the confidentiality of sensitive personal and organizational information, and truthfully representing our capabilities to prospective clients.

Our organization should be a good place to work. To demand the best of ourselves, and to attract, stimulate, and keep the best people, we believe we must make an environment that will support innovation, experimentation, and the taking of appropriate risks. As an organization we should prize the creative participation of each member of our staff. We should welcome the open exchange of ideas and foster the practice of careful listening. We have a duty to actively encourage the personal well-being and the professional development of every person who works here. We should, therefore, maximize the authority and responsibility each person has to continue to make an ever greater contribution. Our policies should be implemented sensitively and consistently.

We should do our work with regard for one another. We recognize the interdependence of everyone who works here, and we expect ourselves to treat one another with respect, candor, kindness, and a sense of the importance of teamwork. We should foster a spirit of service within the staff so that we may better serve the world at large.

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