



Non-Test Appraisal Techniques: Biographies and Autobiographies

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Abstract. In counselling, information regarding the personality assets and liabilities of the counselee plays a very significant role in the counsellor's work. Guidance is said to be for individuals who want to understand themselves and their world. Indeed, the client cannot understand himself if there is no data regarding his interests, personality characteristics, mental ability, achievement, and special aptitudes. Information is required about clients at every stage of the counselling process. Psychological tests provide a very useful source of this information. But the truth is that psychological tests are not infallible, and the information they provide is inadequate most of the time. Herein comes the need to supplement information from psychological tests with information from other sources such as biographies, autobiographies, observations, cumulative records, and so forth. These sources of information are known as non-test appraisal techniques. This paper discusses biographies and autobiographies as two of the non-test techniques of gathering appraisal data on counsees. The discussion is done under the sub-themes: basic assumptions, nature, types, uses and limitations of biographies and autobiographies.

Keywords: Non-test appraisal techniques, biographies, autobiographies, autobiographical tapes.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

The basic assumptions underlying the use of biographies and autobiographies, according to Gibson and Mitchell (1990), are that the use of such techniques can facilitate both counsellor and client understanding of the client's strengths, weaknesses, and uniqueness. These techniques can therefore reveal many hidden facts about the client's personality which may not be brought to the surface by any other technique of gathering appraisal data. In addition, most clients will be able to provide any information that will be meaningful in counselling (Pietrofesa, Hoffman & Splete 1984). When the information evolves from the natural counselling process, counsellors are better

able to explore and understand the thoughts and feelings their clients attach to the data. Pietrofesa, et al. have advocated that any information worth having is information provided by the clients.

NATURE OF BIOGRAPHIES

Although Unachukwu and Igborgbor (1991) reported that not much research has been done on biographical inventories except the one done by Dailey (1958), biographies are as old as recorded history and can provide a very useful source of data on clients for counselling purposes. The World Book Encyclopaedia (2001) defined a biography as the story of a person's life written by someone else. A biography is the written account of the series of events that make up a person's life. It is more than a list of impersonal facts (such as education, work, relationships, and death), and it portrays the subject's experience of those events.

According to Stone (1982), biography is simply the history of a lifetime. It narrates the most important facts of someone's life, his or her childhood, adolescence, military service, wars he or she lived through, educational background, professional life, marriage, children, and the most outstanding achievements in the person's life. In addition, it describes anecdotes, memories, trips, and dearly cherished moments of the person.

A biography presents the facts about a person's life. This information includes what the person did and how the individual influenced the period in which he or she lived. Most biographies are, however, interpretive; they do not only present the facts but also tell what those facts mean. Unlike a profile or curriculum vitae (résumé), a biography presents the subject's story, highlighting various aspects of his or her life, including intimate details of experiences, and may include an analysis of the subject's personality. A work is therefore biographical if it covers all of a person's life. Biographers use such research materials as diaries, personal letters, and autobiographies to write the life story of others. Biographies are usually published in the form of a book or essay, or in some other form such as a film. A good biography should, as much as possible, be

balanced, objective, and free from bias. The content of a biography should include the following:

- Date and place of birth and death
- Family information
- Lifetime accomplishments
- Major events of life
- Effects/impacts on society, historical significance.

TYPES OF BIOGRAPHIES

There are two broad categories of biographies that can be written: authorized and unauthorized. An authorized biography is one that is written with permission of the individual or their estate if they are deceased. An unauthorized biography is written by someone without explicit, approved access to many primary resource materials such as diaries or family archives. Both types of work are equally valid, although they can present vastly different portrayals of the same individual. Getting interviews and access to personal papers is what makes the difference between authorized and unauthorized biographies. With authorized biographies, subjects give you access to themselves, they talk to you, share their memoirs, and will sign forms stating that it is an authorized biography. Unauthorized writers have to make do with public stories and interviews with people that they know instead of the subjects themselves.

Apart from the authorised/unauthorised distinction, there are five chief types of biographies, according to the World Book Encyclopaedia (2001). These are: (1) popular biographies, (2) historical biographies, (3) literary biographies, (4) reference biographies, and (5) fictional biographies. Each of these is briefly explained below.

Popular biographies: they are perhaps the most common form of biography. They tell about the lives of such currently famous people as movie stars (like Agya Koo) and sports figures (like Michael Essien), both in Ghana.

Historical biographies: these biographies deal with a wide variety of individuals and describe how they influenced past events. These works also tell what life was like during certain periods of history.

Literary biographies tell of the life and personality of an author, composer, painter, or other kind of artist. Literary biographies also try to describe the talent and inspiration that enabled the subject to create great works. An example is the life history of the late Professor Kofi Awoonor of Ghana or Chenua Achebe of Nigeria.

Reference biographies: these types of biographies are considered to be the simplest. They contain short accounts that mention only the major events of a person's life. Libraries have many books of reference biographies.

Fictional biographies combine features of biography and a novel. They are considered to be biographies because they are based on real people and events. They are novels because the author created conversations, background information, and other elements. Examples of fictional biographies are *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*, both novels written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Steps in Writing a Biography

There are five basic steps for writing a biography. They are:

1. Choosing the person to be written about
2. Researching the person's life
3. Choosing a format for the written biography
4. Doing the actual writing
5. Editing the biography

NATURE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

In contrast to biographies, an autobiography is the life history of a person written by him or her self. The autobiography is a person's own written report of his or her life, and as such may provide insight into the "inner person"—individuals' experiences and knowledge about themselves (Shertzer & Stone, 1976). An autobiography is therefore an introspective report of one's own experiences. It provides clients with the opportunity to describe their own life as they have experienced it and view it. Gibson and Mitchell (1990) wrote that the autobiography lets a person express what has been important in his or her life, to emphasise likes and dislikes, identify values, describe interests and aspirations, acknowledge successes and failures, and recall meaningful personal

relationships. Such an experience, especially for the mature client, can be thought-provoking, insightful, and a stimulus for action. On occasion, the experience can also relieve tension. The autobiography may prove significant because of emphasis, or omissions.

TYPES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Generally, autobiographies fall into two basic categories, namely, structured and unstructured. Some authors call the two types controlled and uncontrolled while others refer to them as structured and free essay, or comprehensive and topical. In recent years, autobiographical tapes have begun to receive popularity, and so will be discussed under types of autobiographies.

Structured Autobiographies

The structured autobiography is written according to an outline or in response to specific questions or topics (Shertzer & Stone, 1976). The structured autobiography is more purposeful, pointed and specific. It is written along a suggested outline consisting of topics such as (1) my family, (2) my childhood, (3) my years before school, (4) my years at the basic school, (5) places I have lived, (6) trips I have taken, (7) how I spend my time every day, (8) my high school experiences, (9) my teachers and classmates, (10) the newspapers I read, (11) the books I like, (12) my interests, (13) my ambitions and aspirations, and so on. One major advantage that the structured autobiography has over the unstructured one is that it is naturally easier to analyse and study. Its disadvantage is that it puts limits on the client's information.

Unstructured Autobiography

This autobiography is an account of the client's life without regard to specific questions. "It is freely written and does not force any answer or the inclusion of any particular topic. It is the students' choice to write what they think has been important to them and experiences that have had a bearing on their lives to the present time" (Shertzer & Stone, 1976, p. 261). The unstructured autobiography could be systematic or unsystematic, it could concern only an individual's major life events, it could be trenchant defence of certain actions, it could be a confession, or it could be an analytical account. This

type of autobiography offers freedom of expression but its major weakness is that it may contain irrelevant material which may fail to provide specific information to specific questions.

Autobiographical Tapes

Gibson and Mitchell (1990) indicated that in recent years, an innovative deviation from the usual written autobiography is known as autobiographical tape which has been found to be useful by counsellors with some clients. The autobiographical tape is an oral recording of the client's own life history. The client may be provided with a structured outline to respond to or he/she may simply be asked to describe his or her life as it comes to him/her. But before this technique is used, the counsellor must first determine whether it is more useful than the written autobiography. Although the "unnaturalness" of the autobiographical tape can serve as an inhibitor to some clients, voice tone on a taped autobiography can reveal feelings and emotions of the client. This is not possible with the written autobiography. The autobiographical tape is thus a useful tool that the counsellor may wish to consider for certain clients under certain circumstances.

Guidelines for Preparing Autobiographies

Here are some guidelines to be followed when preparing autobiographies, adapted from Gibson and Mitchell (1990), pp. 279—280.

Purpose:

1. To provide you with the opportunity to experience the planning, organising, and writing of your autobiography.
2. To provide you, the writer, and me, the reader, with opportunities for increased understanding, insights, and appreciations of you, the writer.

Each writer may develop and work to an outline that suits his or her own style. The emphasis and detail that you give any period, event, or person will be whatever you determine as appropriate. The following are examples only of outlines and topics that might be appropriate for inclusion in an autobiography.

Example A:

Part I. My preschool years.

My family, where I lived, early memories, friends, likes, dislikes.

Part II. My school years.

Elementary, junior high and senior high school, college, teachers, friends, subjects liked and disliked, activities, significant events, experiences, travels, concerns, and decisions.

Part III. My adult years.

Where I lived, work experiences, friends and family, travels, hobbies, continued education, concerns, and decisions.

Part IV. The current me.

Part V. My future plans.

Example B:

1. Significant people in my life.
2. Significant events and experiences in my life.
3. Significant places in my life.

Example C:

Start your autobiography as far back as you can remember—your earliest childhood memories. Tell about those things that really made an impression on you that stood out in your memory, whether happy or sad. Try to include those events that you believe have affected your life, such as moving to another city or entering junior high school.

As you write about the event, try to show how the event affected you, what people have truly influenced your life the most and how they affected the way you feel and act today. Mention your hopes and plans for the future—what you hope to be doing 10 years from now, for example.

Interpreting Autobiographies

There is no foolproof analysis and interpretation of autobiographies. Nevertheless, Shertzner and Stone (1976) have suggested that the following questions be used as a guide:

1. *What general interpretation does the paper convey?* The counsellor should note whether or not the writer or client gives an impression of happiness, depression, good mental health, and so forth. This can be done by looking out for such emotionally charged words as “love”, “hate”, “mother”, “father”, and so on.

2. *From your knowledge of the individual's history, have significant experiences or persons been omitted?* Any such omissions may be a cue worthy of follow-up in an interview situation, although no autobiography can be complete in every detail.
3. *What is the length of the autobiography?* The length of the autobiography depends upon, but not limited to: (a) the writer's motivation to write, (b) the type of autobiography—whether it is structured or unstructured, (c) the client's proficiency level in the language to be used, (d) the degree to which students believe they need help with their problems. The ideal length of an autobiography however, as suggested by Shertzer and Stone, ranges between 200 and 5,000 words.
4. *How is the paper organised?* The common organisation for unstructured autobiography is chronological. It should be noted whether or not there are gaps or omissions in the material. If students are given an outline format to follow, any changes in the prepared outline should be noted.
5. *What is the level of expression?* Lack of depth or evasiveness in the autobiography may be an indication that the student is attempting to hide something or does not wish to disclose his concerns and anxieties.
6. *Are there inaccuracies in the paper?* Any attempt on the students' part to deliberately falsify experiences or events, when detected, is indicative of inaccuracies in the student's paper.

USES OF BIOGRAPHIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

1. Biographies and autobiographies are used to gather information on clients' personality characteristics that serve as a precursor to the counselling interview. This is to say that the relevant information that the counsellor needs during the counselling process can be provided through biographies and autobiographies.
2. Biographies and autobiographies, unlike psychological tests, are used to provide an authentic insight into clients' personalities. Put in another way, through biographies and autobiographies, counsellors, teachers and school administrators are able to identify and understand certain

personality traits of clients, and this information can be real and dependable.

3. The autobiography in particular is vast in scope. It covers a wide area of the client's life that other tools are not able to cover. This makes autobiographies a preferred instrument by some counsellors for some clients in certain circumstances.
4. Because autobiographies deal with subjective experience, data gathered through them are taken to be authentic since, "Who feels it knows it all." This is because it involves experiences of the individual and since we were not there, we cannot but take it to be true.
5. Since others' reflections about clients are often biased, prejudiced and misleading, autobiographies are preferred (Pietrofesa, et al. 1984).
6. Autobiographies provide clients (students) with the opportunity to describe their own life as they have experienced it and view it (Gibson & Mitchell, 1990).

LIMITATIONS OF BIOGRAPHIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

One of the inherent weaknesses in biographies and autobiographies is that they are highly subjective and hence have low validity and reliability. The real magnitude of each problem is therefore not known. It is thus difficult to tell whether the writer has exaggerated anything or whether he has tried to underestimate its importance.

Shertzer and Stone (1976) also pointed out that one problem encountered in using autobiographies to elicit facts is communication. According to them, when questions are printed and their answers are written down by respondents, a misunderstanding may occur either in the respondent's interpretation of the question or in the counsellor's interpretation of the client's response.

A biographer must decide how much to tell about a subject's life. Many potential subjects of a biography may leave so much material that a writer has difficulty deciding what to include. As a result, many biographers write extremely long works with so many details that the subject's character is unclear

(The World Book Encyclopaedia, 2001). This can pose a threat to the counsellor's work because information about the client is not explicit.

Furthermore, autobiographies, whether written or taped, cannot be effective with some category of clients. The technique will not be appropriate with clients who can neither read nor write, and those of them who lack the ability to express themselves clearly orally. Even for a client who can write, his ability to recall past experiences accurately and in considerable detail is important since a lack of this ability can lead to a distortion of the facts that are required.

Another weakness associated with biographies and autobiographies is that they have not received widespread utilisation by most counsellors. According to Shertzer and Stone (1976), Shaffer reported in 1954 that the autobiography was used by only one-fourth of counsellors in large school systems and that only one-half of them had ever seen an autobiography. Similarly, Unachukwu and Igborgbor (1991) have reported that not much research has been done on biographical inventories except the one done by Dailey (1958). It is important to mention here that from the literature reviewed so far, no recent study has been found to the contrary.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both biography and autobiography give information about the life history of clients. While biography is a person's history written by somebody else, the autobiography is the history of the client written by the client himself or herself. There is no denying the fact that biography and autobiography provide a very useful source of information about clients that other techniques cannot provide. Information gathered through these techniques serve as useful precursors to the counselling interview, and is also useful throughout the counselling relationship. In deciding to use biographic and autobiographic information about clients, however, the counsellor must be fully aware of the limitations and strengths of these non-test appraisal tools.

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