

The devil his due: Psychohistory and psychosocial studies

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Abstract This paper revisits and reevaluates the Eriksonian branch of psycho-historians, whose academic influence peaked in the early 1970s before falling largely out of sight by the start of the twenty-first century. Why did what I argue was an unwarranted eclipse occur? The foremost figures in this loose grouping were Erikson himself, Robert J. Lifton, Kenneth Keniston, and Robert Coles. What can the comparatively new field of psychosocial studies usefully learn and integrate from these mostly neglected predecessors? I examine how this widespread academic amnesia set in and explain the relevance of the Eriksonian tradition, relate ways in which psycho-historians trailblazed psychosocial studies, address the importance of an intrinsic “activist ingredient” in such ventures, and argue that both psychohistory and psychosocial studies stand to benefit greatly from such an intellectual exchange.

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Introduction

Virtually eclipsed by the start of the twenty-first century, Erik Erikson’s variant of psychohistory first emerged in the late 1950s as the painstakingly artful application of psychoanalytic tools to people operating as best they could in the vortices generated by historical forces and by their own inner worlds.¹ Psychohistory had previously been derided even within some psychoanalytic circles as merely untethered speculative psychobiography. Critics, even well after Erikson’s era, detected meager progress since Freud’s metapsychological excursions into da Vinci and Moses. “Psychohistorical

claims have been too timid, too monocausal, and reductionist, and have paid too little heed to external reality,” judged one astringent observer (Walkup, 1988, p. 406). Psychohistory has been “dazzlingly dismissive of the most elementary canons of evidence, logic and, most of all, imaginative restraint,” accused another naysayer (Stannard, 1980, p. 3). Yet Eriksonian psychohistory manifestly was not engaged in reducing complicated people’s lives to their infantile or early childhood experiences. The Eriksonians scorned all reductive approaches, a stance which drew them into heated conflict with many colleagues across the social sciences, especially those enamored of formal theory and quantitative methods.

Freud readily acknowledged, but may have underemphasized, the social components of neuroses (Freud, 1905/1955, pp. 1–122). While analysts would try their hand at psychoanalytically guided biographies, psychohistory arguably surfaced into public view only with the appearance of Erikson’s *Young Man Luther*. Here I argue the relevance for psychosocial studies – the “as-yet unformed discipline” – of the Eriksonian psycho-historians (Figlio, 2014, p. 170; Jacobsen, 2020). These restive savants gathered annually between 1966 and 2015 at Robert Jay Lifton’s Wellfleet summer house and included Erikson, Lifton, Kenneth Keniston, Robert Coles, Bruce Mazlish, Norman Birnbaum, Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich, Margaret Brennen, Peter Brooks, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, Charles Strozier, and Philip Rieff, among other notables in attendance (Lifton, 1975, pp. 12–17; Lifton, 2011, pp. 204, 335).² David Riesman was a deep influence, whether he attended or not. Other invitees included Howard Zinn, Frederick Wyatt, Noam Chomsky, Richard Sennett, Peter Gay, Ashis Nandy, Richard Goodwin, Harvey Cox, Frank Manuel, Jonathan Schell, Raoul Hilberg, Sudhir Kakar, Leo Marx, David Dellinger, Daniel Berrigan, Norman Mailer, Wendy Doniger, Cathy Caruth, Steve Marcus, Richard Barnett, and Richard Falk, the lattermost with whom Lifton coedited a then audaciously critical book on Vietnam war crimes after a searing visit there (Falk *et al.*, 1971). Anyone cognizant of the Eriksonian psycho-historians (a term they tended to hyphenate) can spend a great deal of time scouring current psychosocial studies journals, books, and conference papers for the slightest trace of these remarkable forerunners. Take, for example, a typical panel paper precis at a recent psychosocial studies conference announcing a supposedly brand new framework, which

represents an intervention into policy, practice and academic debates about mental health and ‘mainstream’ approaches to diagnosis [and] works against medicalization of emotional and psychological distress and argues that it is imperative to understand the social, societal, cultural, institutional and structural dynamics that result in (a) the medicalization of mental ill-health and (b) individuals’ (service users/clients/offenders/patients) engagement with a range of institutions throughout the life course

across health, social welfare and criminal justice systems. (Dobson *et al.*, 2018)

All these concerns are correctly described as “themes familiar in psycho-social informed scholarship and debate” – only then to be followed by a list of scholars whose works date no further back than 2001 (Dobson *et al.*, 2018). This millennial cut-off is common, even *de rigueur* (and afflicts other amnesiac social sciences too). A special issue of *Free Associations* (2020) featuring a bevy of fine articles from the same 2018 conference, which moreover dealt thematically with social turmoil half a century earlier in the heyday of the Eriksonian psycho-historians, likewise tellingly lacked a single reference to the latter’s work.

“Almost any idea that has not been around for a while,” Albert Hirschmann (1991) perceptively noted about the social sciences generally, “has a good chance of being mistaken for an original insight” (p. 29). One stumbles across occasional exceptions such as Daniel Pick interviewing Robert Jay Lifton, but they are astonishingly rare (Pick, 2015). Among several factors responsible for the rapid receding of Erikson and his fractious cohort from academic view, Robert Wallerstein (1998) seconds a scholar who worked with Erikson at Harvard and even then could not help but notice the degree to which Erikson had been marginalized by mainstream psychoanalysis, and the depths of the envy stirred in his colleagues by the immense popularity of both his writings and his persona. Because he was so famous, his peers in psychoanalysis concluded that he was a popularizer. (Would that psychoanalysis were so popular now!) (pp. 245–6, fn9)

Any good Kleinian, at least, would not underestimate the role of envy in these matters.

What, then, is the well-earned legacy of the Eriksonian psycho-historians? (For the sake of space, the separate psychohistorical enterprises of Lloyd deMause and Vamik Volkan are not addressed here.) Should there be a revival of interest in the psycho-historians and an explicit incorporation of their best work into the field of psychosocial studies, which, emergent in the UK since the 1980s, formed a Psychosocial Studies Network in 2007 and then a professional association in 2013 (Association for Psychosocial Studies, 2018, p. 18)? Below I examine the powerful relevance of the Eriksonian tradition, relate ways in which the psycho-historians trailblazed psychosocial studies, address the importance of an intrinsic “activist ingredient” through the example of dealing with whistleblowers, and argue that both psychohistory and psychosocial studies stand to benefit greatly from a rigorous intellectual exchange: Eriksonian psychohistory from an appreciative renewal of scholarly attention to its remarkable body of work; psychosocial studies from being relieved of reinventing certain wheels and thence to go about refining as well as devising other, and perhaps better, means of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Don't Look Back?

The initial Wellfleet meeting report discerned that psychohistory demanded intra-psychic, social, cultural, political, and historical levels of study that no existing theory could credibly embody or accomplish (Wellfleet Group, 1966, p. 6). “Collaboration between scholars from different disciplines,” the authors warned, “requires a willingness to modify and amplify the traditional vocabulary and theory of different disciplines” – which was not a willingness easily granted then nor is it now. The mode of inquiry they gingerly advocated was “an ever expanding use of the self” as research instrument, with all due caveats. “Rather than being weightlessly suspended in an a historical-non-psychological space, this ‘instrument’ is subject to the gravitational pulls of its immediate setting and its prior commitments” – implicitly invoking a then highly influential Karl Mannheim – but “efforts to evolve a level of self-awareness that avoids both pseudo-detachment and indulgent confessional are still at their inception” (Lifton, 1970, p. 5). However, they soon ditched the heady inference that one might attain the academically angelic status of Mannheimian “free-floating intellectual,” however much any of them desired to do so, realizing such an admirable aspiration becomes a pathetic delusion the moment one imagines one achieves it (Mannheim, 1936).

After witnessing much predictable internal divisiveness, Lifton (1970) had by 1970 stepped back from even faint aspirations of forming a “school” to take the stance that psychohistory at its best is “investigative radicalism” for which task “no blueprint is offered,” at least at the start (p. 5). Thus, an “activist ingredient” in the research approaches to those inhabiting, or subsisting beneath, power structures was very evident from the start. This investigative project stemmed from a general uneasiness among practitioners of both psychology and history about the capacity of their traditional methods to describe and explain multi-leveled human activity. The utmost and reflexive imperative was to avoid the “Faustian intellectual temptation to make things very simple – either by direct and uncritical application of clinical Freudian terms to all manner of historical events, or else by making believe that neither Freud nor the emotional turmoil he described has ever existed” (p. 6). Psychohistorical actuality, Erikson (1950) stated, “has two components: the relevance of historical changes for the identity formation of the individual, and the relevance for future historical change of the kinds of identity formation which have become dominant in a given society in a given period of history” (p. 129). As would be congenially expressed in the next millennium by a British psychosocial scholar, “[the]social is psychically invested and the psychological is socially formed,” and the twain indeed do meet, whether one wishes to realize it or not (Frosh, 2003, p. 1560).

Kindergarten positivism, for all its elementary uses, was never allowed to be a deterrent.³ What exactly were Freud's (or Marx's or Darwin's) dependent variables anyway? Would any sage have been better off sticking to a single one? Still, even a wide range of interests does not prevent ambitious and overreaching scholars from treating models as universal skeleton keys (Ritchie, 2020). For Erikson, Lifton, and kindred inquirers, an essential purpose of their enterprise was to alert practitioners to the problematic currents of transference/counter-transference, from which cherished methods are no sure shield. Erikson also refused to conflate normality in development with the achievement of "health" in any specific era, including our own, keeping the term "health" confined snugly in scare quotes, pending further inquiry (Evans, 1967, p. 19). Erich Fromm once described a task he pursued in common with psychohistory as illuminating how societies create "a person who wants to do what he or she has to do" so as to enable newly aware people to peel themselves away from those forces – though that goal hardly exhausts the parallels between his own agenda and theirs (1991, p. 19).

Psychohistory in the Making

Erikson (1958) was interested not only in explicating "psychoanalysis as a historical tool" but also in "throwing light on psychoanalysis as a tool of history", since, inasmuch "[as] a system of observation [psychoanalysis] takes history; as a system of ideas it makes history" (pp. 16–17). The Eriksonians were anything but men and women fancying themselves in white lab coats and confidently brandishing impeccable methods and shiny sterile instruments. Psychoanalysis operated in a changing historical milieu and, like any other paradigm, was "a system of thought subject to fashionable manipulation by molders of public opinion" (p. 21). Erikson strove to locate fruitful points of intersection of biography with history, where singular individuals, and the collectivities providing their contexts, encountered a social environment that was ripe for the picking, so that the "resources of tradition" then "fuse with new inner resources to create something potentially new" (p. 20). Unfurling his epigenetic stages theory, Erikson (1985 [1962]) argued that "each stage of development has its own acuteness and actuality, because a stage is a new configuration of past and future, a new combination of defense and drive, a new set of capacities fit for a new setting of tasks and opportunities, a new and wider radius of significant encounters" (p. 50).

The objective of developing a psychological framework that takes historical currents seriously must threaten what Lifton (1970) viewed as the "rigid abstractions ruling most psychological thought" (p. 22). This inherently disruptive form of analysis is what the Eriksonians fostered in various disciplines, even if they were ultimately, if incompletely, fended off.

Contemporary critics attest that the Eriksonians' predicament has only intensified, with disciplines today "regularly separated from one another, often policed by hiring committees, the request for new positions, and the protocols of professional associations" (Butler, cited in Frosh, 2015, p. vi). Erikson's psychohistory intended to enrich social analyses by giving fair dues both to psychoanalysis and to social science fields. It remains as much the case now as then that structuralist-, rationalist-, and/or materialist-based studies, for all their meticulous mappings of environmental cues, often cannot predict what any individual or group will do, except under the most extreme circumstances, such as concentration camps for inmates or foreign occupations for conquered areas – and, often enough, not even then (Jacobsen, 2017a).

As object relations theorists, Kleinians and Lacanians vied for center stage in psychoanalytic circles in subsequent decades, during which the optimism that solemn critics attributed to ego psychology, into which Erikson's work was lumped, could only betray a regrettable foolishness. Wallerstein (1998), though, points out that Erikson's epigenetic stages formulation "was never properly integrated into the ego psychological metapsychology formulated by Hartmann and his collaborators – a paradigm then dominant, at least in America – and in fact over time became progressively marginalized within the psychoanalytic mainstream" (p. 230). Hence, Wallerstein notes the "clear relationship of Erikson's concepts of (ego) identity to emerging concepts of self in relation to objects" was completely overlooked (p. 229), and so Erikson was shunted aside in the USA as much as in the UK.

"Only when the relation of historical forces to the basic functions and stages of the mind have been jointly charted and understood can we begin a psychoanalytic critique of society as such," Erikson (1958) contended (pp. 20–1). Primacy lay with the social sphere, though as a sound Freudian Erikson never viewed the social realm as fully determinative, given its interplay with the inner world that he strove to map as well as the elusive subject permitted. Loewenberg (1983) was on the mark in observing that, after Erikson, the "special power of the psychobiographer's use of ego psychology is the attention to the adaptation by the historical actor of the forces of his upbringing to the needs of the reality situation, rather than a focus on clinical pathology, which often enough proved to be beside the point" (p. 25). One also notes that Erikson (1959) regarded adolescence, for example, not as an affliction but as a *normative* crisis, and extended this normative emphasis to later stages too, which happens to implicate professionals as anything but value-neutral (p. 116).

Many cultural rivulets flowed into arenas that took the name of psychohistory. A particularly odd brand is Isaac Asimov's sci-fi foretelling of a "universe which combines history, sociology, and mathematical statistics to make general predictions about the future behavior of very large groups of people," an objective which could not be more alien to Eriksonians (Palumbo, 1976, p. 26). Lifton (1970) admits chagrin over the remotest association with a project

conceived to champion elites (p. 12). This Asimovian “psychohistory” exerted real world impact, and Paul Krugman credited Asimov with inspiring him to go into economics, which he amusingly read as the closest thing to it. The supreme catch to the Asimovian project is that no one outside the ensconced elite could know the project even existed because those enlightened nuisances would then depart from their grooved patterns of behavior and cast everything into a state of hopeless unpredictability, generating unwelcome autonomous human activity. No goal, of course, could be more welcome to the Wellfleet participants who were given, despite occasional fits of tact, to the overturning of disciplinary apple carts.

Erikson and his fellow travellers certainly had no intent of submerging knowledge in a miasma of unconscious projections. What is gained from added complexities, assuming they were missing in the first place? Do certain strains of added complexity, upon scrutiny, turn out to be reworded or parallel versions of work in Eriksonian psychohistory? “The principle of parsimony seldom applies in explaining individual lives,” Keniston (1965) argued, and “rather only when we have begun to understand the subtle interweaving of themes, the over-determination of any single act, belief or fantasy, and the multiple functions that every dream, wish, act and philosophy serves, do we begin to understand something of the individual” (p. 49). The psychohistorical field pivoted between two crucial recognitions: (1) that there is no self-contained universal psyche; and (2) that history is not driven solely by external forces. In the course of doing likewise, psychosocial studies reinvents at least one sturdy pair of wheels. An early reader of this paper observed that the amnesiac circumstances it depicts arose from foreshortened Ph.D programmes, narrower frames of knowledge (as a result), and severe pressures to publish supposedly original material. As defenses go, the plea is entirely understandable, if far from satisfactory.⁴

The perilous political climate in which psycho-history arose is worthy of attention. For Fromm writing in 1953, simply to speak of a social psychology that attends to material concerns was deemed rashly radical. The Eriksonians therefore tended to skirt Marx, the Frankfurt School, and even Fromm himself to generate their own diluted brand of dialectical imagination, if one shorn of Frankfurt pessimism. In the late 1950s, before *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* had become known and Gramsci popularized, Erikson (1958), like Sartre and others, disdained a stunted form of Marxism then prevalent because it ignored “introspective psychology and makes a man’s economic position the fulcrum of his acts and thoughts” (p. 17). Yet dogma, as Eriksonians understood it, went both ways, and encompasses centrists too who fancy they are immune. Erikson (1969) was in careful conscious dialogue with Marxism and other forms of political economy throughout his epic Gandhi study (p. 205). As he (1977) argued, “[t]he psycho-historian’s job [is] specifying in all their complementarity the inner dynamics as well as the social conditions which make history seem to repeat, to renew, or to surpass itself” (p. 168). Barrington

Moore (1978) too lauded Erikson and Coles for assaying “the development of moral standards that condemn significant aspects of currently accepted social practices” and for understanding the ability and courage of lower classes “to stand up to oppressive authority” (pp. 109–17).

Erikson and Lifton were highly willing to revise theory in light of emergent evidence, which they in turn clearly understood was affected by the theories and the unconscious inclinations both the subjects and their investigators import. As Erikson (1977) wrote, “I believe, in fact, that any man projects or comes to project on the men and the times he studies some un-lived portions, and often the unrealized selves of his own, not to speak of what William James called ‘the murdered self’” (p. 148). In *Home From The War*, a study of disenchanted Vietnam Veterans, Lifton (1973) was impelled by force of drastic circumstance to venture into “advocacy research” where “intellectually rigorous investigation is combined with broader social principles, causes, or groups” (p. 17). There, among many lessons, Lifton finds that the most resistant soldiers grounded their deviance from lethal groupthink in prior values taken from religion, solitary meditative inclinations, and, perhaps foremost, a professional idealism about their military craft (p. 58). The veterans Lifton treated were “bound up with a world that had been turned on its head and their entering a counterfeit universe,” institutionally imposed, and expressly not the kind Lacanians tend to posit (p. 14). Indeed, throughout his studies of thought reform, nuclear weapons, Nazi physicians, and Vietnam, Lifton’s encounters with the symbolized realm, liable to shattering and reassembling, meant that one “must reenter a meaning structure, a set of experiences that are bound up with vitality and some sense of larger human connectedness” – and that a certain solidity of identity was always possible, if not totally immune to external pressures (Lifton, 2011, p. 58). Here again he ponders the use of the self as an investigative instrument, of an “articulated subjectivity,” and pronounces it indispensable (Lifton 1973, p. 21). Against academic disciplines patrolled by righteous authorities intent on promoting only positivist methods, Keniston (1965) complained about the stifling narrowness of “the pursuit of methodologically correct data” and noted that the evident intense fear of subjectivity leads only to “piecemeal pursuits” (p. 12). While Lifton wrote of psychohistorical quests instead as tentative assemblies of “mosaics,” Erikson invoked the language of configurations to describe the many and often intuitive tasks he undertook.

Psychohistory Reincarnate?

Psychosocial programs sprang up, especially in the UK, after the cresting of the Eriksonian psycho-historian legacy an ocean away, of which they seemed oblivious. For at least one conspicuous strand, this revival of psycho-historical concerns arose, unlike Wellfleet, as part of the quest of “forging a psychosocial

presence in psychology,” not in or with history or any other social science discipline (Frosh, 2003, p. 1548). Frosh explains that “psychology emerges out of a set of perceptions of individuality and selfhood which in turn are connected with the hegemony of particular construction of social reality” (p. 1547). The field’s focus is on the “boundaries between individual and social, exemplified by theories of the social as free interaction of individuals (methodological individualism) and the Althusserian notion of the person who is fully constructed and constrained by social forces [. . .] *So really this is about how a subject can be more than the forces molding him*” – exactly as the Eriksonians posited (p. 1545, emphasis in original).

The Association for Psychosocial Studies states its *métier* is the study of the ways in which subjective experience is interwoven with social life. Psychological issues and subjective experiences cannot be abstracted from societal, cultural, and historical contexts; nor can they be deterministically reduced to the social. Similarly, social and cultural worlds are shaped by psychological processes and intersubjective relations. (Association for Psychological Studies, n.d.)

Again, so far, so congruent with the seemingly moribund Eriksonians. Psychosocial studies is characterized by (a) its explicit inter- or trans-disciplinarity, (b) its development of non-positivistic theory, method, and praxis, and (c) its orientation towards progressive social and personal change. Psychosocial research draws inspiration from a range of sources, including sociology, psychoanalysis, critical psychology, critical theory, post-structuralism, process philosophy, feminism, post-colonial theory, queer theory, and affect theory. Psychosocial studies has a strong link with several fields of practice, particularly psychotherapy and counseling, psychoanalysis, group analysis, social work and social policy, group relations, and organizational consultancy.

A UEL prospectus describes psychosocial studies as “committed to the notion that psychological phenomena and subjective experience are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts,” and to the “study of the ways in which the psychological realm of fantasy, emotion and desire shape those social and cultural worlds” (UEL Psychosocial Studies Research Group, 2016/17). So, in this rendering, psychosocial studies, unlike psychohistory, is not necessarily wed to psychoanalysis or, for that matter, even to scholarship, with some programs allocating equal or more space for pure clinical training. (Indeed, some psychosocial practitioners abjure psychoanalysis altogether.) Still, in the UK, Birkbeck, the University of East London, Essex, and Roehampton may be numbered among the more psychoanalytic regimens that seem to comprise the majority of such programmes (Woodward, 2015). Some elements in British psychosocial studies tend to prize the Foucauldian dictum that “where power

operates, so does resistance to power” and present this resistance, somewhat ambiguously, as “an active construction of being” (Frosh, 2003, p. 1558). Still, Freud clearly located resistance at the very core of humanity and viewed man as “a never fully socialized creature” (Wrong, 1961, p. 183). To “affirm instincts,” as Jacoby (1983) points out, “is to range oneself squarely against domestication” – which is a crucial point one cannot be sure most psychosocial studies proponents these days concede (p. 158).

Still, the Association for Psychosocial Studies states that “[p]sychological issues and subjective experiences cannot be abstracted from societal, cultural, and historical contexts; nor can they be deterministically reduced to the social” (n.d). Presumably, then, the person can be reduced neither to an effect of social structure nor to an isolated monadic agent, which, as we have seen, is a point wholly compatible with, and explicitly anticipated by, the psycho-historians. Contemporary psychosocial studies regards “the idea of the psycho-social subject as a meeting point of inner and outer forces, something constructed and constructing, a power-using subject which also subject to power is a difficult subject to theorize, and no one has worked it out” (Frosh, 2003, p. 1573), which again is a useful restatement of Eriksonian aims. It is not that no one has “worked it out,” one is tempted to infer, but that no one has worked out fundamental questions to everyone else’s satisfaction, and likely never will, which is no counsel for despair.

Frosh and his coauthors describe most, if not all, Brazilian psychoanalysts as complicit with the torture regime of the dictatorship years. They reveal how an elitist Brazilian psychoanalytic association echoed earlier psychologistic dismissals of protest and resistance as toxic oedipal traces, as was rather prevalent in the US in the 1960s era (Rubin *et al.*, 2016). The standard repertoire of reactionary tropes and counterrevolutionary reflexes masqueraded anew as neutral analysis. A comparative exploration of this Brazilian phenomenon with Lifton’s Nazi doctors would have been an interesting additional facet. In some cases, as Eriksonians recognized, one may not need psychoanalysis to explain how professionals, including psychoanalysts, misbehave under trying circumstances. Indeed, Lifton (2004) found that “physicians are no more or less moral than other people” (p. 415).

But, as heirs to shamans and witch doctors, we may be seen by others – and sometimes by ourselves – as possessing special magic in connection with life and death, which magic various regimes have sought to harness to their own despotic ends. Physicians have served as actual torturers in Chile and elsewhere; have surgically removed ears as punishment for desertion in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; have incarcerated political dissenters in mental hospitals, notably in the Soviet Union; have, as whites in South Africa, falsified medical reports on blacks who were tortured or killed; and have, as Americans associated with the Central Intelligence Agency, conducted harmful, sometimes fatal, experiments involving drugs and mind control.

Scholars still have a poor grasp of what happens to people, and especially highly credentialed professionals, when they are embedded in what Lifton (1973) termed an “atrocious-producing situation” (pp. 63, 146–7). In any case, a scrutiny of key Wellfleet texts would reveal useful previous groundwork so as to facilitate the psychosocial studies agenda. The primary principle to be gleaned from the Eriksonian approach is that people live foremost in history, not in their heads.⁵ Analyzing Nixon and Kissinger, Bruce Mazlish downplayed tangible factors and was castigated for it by others in the Erikson camp. In his study of Chinese thought reform, Lifton (1963/1989), by contrast, minimized jargon and foregrounded the fates of people “condemned by an infallible environment” whose obliging functionaries launched ferocious “assaults upon identity” (p. 68). Labels and traits did not explain why people behaved how they did. The “uncomfortable resemblances” of the brainwashing process with McCarthyism were duly raised (pp. 457–8). “Between the individual and the human condition stand the complex structure of society, the traditional currents of culture, and the legacies of history and these determine which of the many human potentials are to be realized,” Keniston (1965) argues, “which will be neglected and what form they will take” (p. 205).

These analysts turned first to social influences that stir acknowledged psychic forces at play in both individuals and groups – and affected them too. Erikson, a grateful immigrant, was initially wary of taking a stand on Vietnam until the exposure of My Lai, while Lifton and others at Wellfleet opposed it to the point of what Lifton (2011) self-deprecatingly called “fat cat civil disobedience,” of going to jail for antiwar activities and generating fat FBI dossiers (p. 224). The turbulent events they were researching triggered an ever-latent activist ingredient in their framework. This observation brings us to the underexplored examples set by whistleblowers, where there is a suggestive explanatory link to the soldiers Lifton treated.

Whistleblowers and Malignant Normality

Under any rationalist social theory, whistleblowers would never emerge from powerful institutions. The incentive structures discourage such action, assuring the imposition of the highest costs to careers, personal networks, freedom, and even physical safety. Indeed, in Sullivanian and Meadian social psychological schemes where we supposedly are made up of “reflected appraisals,” it is inconceivable that a Daniel Ellsberg, Edward Snowden, or Chelsea Manning would ever appear. If environmental cues and organizational constraints were all that mattered, the *Pentagon Papers* – or Manning’s data dump to Julian Assange’s Wikileaks (misportrayed by a vengeful US Government as an aided solicitation) – would never see the light of day – except perhaps, as incensed US officials claim, because of unstable personalities in the grips of egomania,

mental illness, bribery, or innate treachery. Given that the US National Security Agency, as confirmed by the Federal Appeals Court in September, illegally engaged in mass domestic mass surveillance, to the point of being able “to construct a complete electronic narrative of [any] individual’s life,” and forthrightly lied about it, chagrined officials were avid to turn the blame around on the messenger (Harding, 2014, p.11; Neidig, 2020). Projective identification in elite ranks is not just a defense mechanism; it is standard operating procedure.

As a brief exemplification regarding the activist ingredient implicit in research, note how psycho-historians addressed Daniel Ellsberg in the 1970s. For people nestled in total institutions like the military, adaptability is imperative, and is virtuous or vicious depending on what one is adapting to, Keniston (1965) noted (p. 377). Of course, there are organizational functionaries who cannot comprehend why anyone would disturb their “counterfeit universe.” Lifton’s work with Vietnam veterans seems most applicable to present-day whistleblowers such as Assange or Manning, who may not witness truculent colleagues mowing down civilians (though note the infamous Iraq Apache helicopter massacre tape) but can understand, and are implicated in, the chain of dire consequences of policies (Lifton, 1973, p. 118).

In 1971, under Federal indictment and by no means then a popular figure, Ellsberg was a feted guest at Wellfleet, whose members donated to his defense. If anything testifies to the Eriksonian primacy of material factors and ethical motives over the inclination to impute pathology to deviating members of any approved institution, this invitation does. A hard-nosed Nixon administration crew resorted to every psychiatric epithet to discredit Ellsberg’s (and Anthony Russo’s) releasing the Defense Department records on the conduct of Vietnam, which disclosed a “high politics” realm of chronic lies. Fearing documents implicating Nixon were also in Ellsberg’s possession, White House burglars raided the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, the marvelously ironic first step leading to Nixon’s resignation in 1974, and likely the only instance when a shrink made a significant difference in US politics.

Henry Kissinger, a formidable self-serving leaker himself, raged at Ellsberg as being mentally unbalanced (see Grandin, 2015).⁶ Ellsberg later dryly observed that every single smear of Snowden, Manning, and Assange was said of himself too at the time (Ellsberg, personal communication, 2017). Indeed, the Nixon White House gave Lifton’s term “malignant normality” a new illustrative instance whereby, before being inundated with their own indictments, they portrayed themselves as the measure of sanity and probity in the body politic. Any fair approach to whistleblowers first must make judgments about the possibly pathological contexts in which they operate, which Eriksonians were most willing and capable of doing.

Ellsberg (2002) has provided a memoir, as has Snowden (2019), to be parsed by whoever wishes to ferret out psychological proclivities. Ellsberg was also the

subject of an exquisitely contrived pathography, addressed elsewhere (Wells, 2001; Jacobsen, 2002). While an affable *Führerprinzip* guided Nixon's aides and many a colleague, Ellsberg, like Lifton's GIs, observed his oath to the Constitution and to the right of the public to be informed of misdeeds performed in their name and funded by them. Meanwhile, Ellsberg's cold warrior associates chose to tread the more traveled path. Even after the Vietnam War undeniably proved a moral and military fiasco, it remained the case that only hawkish careerists thrived in the unapologetic Pentagon and the State Department (Packer, 2019, p. 124).

Psycho-historians would have been hard put to devise a credible explanation for these contrasting choices based on intrapsychic grounds and, to their credit, did not try. Still, according to the Freudian schema, resistance to social constraints can come from three sources in the human psyche with quite different consequences: (1) from the id an elemental rebellion against any form of constraint combined with an imperious demand for immediate gratification, (2) from the ego a cool, realistic and rational critical assessment and (3) from the superego a passionately uncompromising moral condemnation. Presumably it should be possible to formulate the type of family situation and socialization process that leads to an emphasis on each of these three. (Moore, 1978, p. 110 fn43)

Yet how far will this schema carry one in understanding a whistleblower? Recall this was a fiery era in which Peter Braestrup of *The Washington Post* assailed Seymour Hersh (2018) as a "lying son of a bitch" for reporting the My Lai massacre, and in which *The Post* and *The New York Times* went down to the wire over whether to publish the *Pentagon Papers* (p. 125). It is also important to understand that American atrocities started within a week of the arrival of the First Marine Division in March 1965 but went unreported by journalists who "naturally" identified with their side (p. 134; Turse, 2013). James Reston of *The New York Times* questioned whether My Lai ought to be covered at all, given the "adverse consequences for the United States" (Hersh, 2018, p. 165). Erikson, by stark contrast, asked Hersh for permission to quote his work on My Lai, and soon after hosted Hersh (p. 170). Lifton (1973) cites Ellsberg on the institutional functionary's "need not to know" as an aggressive form of psychic numbing to the consequences of one's actions (p. 243). Later, Ellsberg published a volume on nuclear war planning, which chimed in very well with Lifton's books on the same subject (Ellsberg, 2017; Lifton and Falk, 1982).

Lifton and his coeditors write that in the wake of My Lai they nonetheless sympathized with the GIs (especially with those with "animating guilt") "who are being prosecuted mainly to sustain an image of self-righteousness and decency on the part of those who have initiated, planned and are continuing the vicious tactics of battle that have long been a part of the war" (Falk *et al.*, 1971, p. xi). For Eriksonians, what was required in approaching mighty institutions

was “the full intellectual probing of the most egregious behavior and its consequences” (Lifton, 2011, p. 147), which entails an activist ingredient which is hardly welcome by such institutions, including academic ones housing some investigators. Those organizations that want to understand what makes an Ellsberg, Assange, Snowden, or Manning tick, and reductively zero in on ambivalent relationships with their fathers and such, do so in the quest to spot and nab them early. “Straight” paint-by-numbers psychology studies that resort to calculative fairness-loyalty trade-offs are not only pallid interpreters of whistleblower action but even go so far as offer themselves as fixers for the aggrieved institutions (e.g., Dungan *et al.*, 2015, pp. 129–33; Bochario *et al.*, 2012). Psychosocial inquiries obviously can and should be poised to do far better when they undertake similar studies. Lifton (1973) appeared extremely prescient when he wrote nearly five decades ago of how the “credibility gap between American leaders (especially the two Indochina-war presidents) and the people becomes, more fundamentally, an extension of the war’s counterfeit universe to the entire national polity” (p. 247). In response, the crisis of Vietnam, much like the Covid-19 crisis today, drove troubled professionals in psychoanalytic circles away from purely psychoanalytic commentary to the stance of psychoanalytically informed citizens contributing to the public forum.

What makes this psychohistorical and psychosocial research more than a species of “great man” history is that investigative work, not least by reporters of the caliber of Seymour Hersh, Patrick Cockburn, and John Pilger, depends on contacts with members – intermediate enablers, as it were – inside government organizations who are dismayed at secretive illegal activities, and who therefore leak. By contrast, US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, midway through the Vietnam war, was a demoralized nervous wreck, who did not reveal his condition out of loyalty to the malignant normality in government (VanDeMark, 2018, pp. 404–20). Any adequate treatment of whistleblowers should impel scholars to step outside strictly psychological methods, where everything can dwindle to psychiatric conditions, as exemplified in too many psychology studies, some cited above. In the present climate, psychosocial treatments of especially Julian Assange, the subject of sustained government-sponsored vilification campaigns, are extremely tricky to undertake (Ali and Kunstler, 2019).⁷ UK public opinion was turned hard against Assange with an approval rating of 1 in 3 in 2013 dropping to 1 in 9 by 2019, about half as much as the US numbers (Waldersee and Sanders, 2019). It would be most remarkable if professionals were unaffected by these trends. Still, the choice thus far by psychosocial studies practitioners *not* to attempt analyses of Ellsberg, Assange, Manning, or Snowden might be read as a bracing sign of their kindred sensibilities with those of the psycho-historians (Ellsberg Archive Project, 2021). We shall see. At some point, that interpretive game will be afoot and will hopefully proceed with shrewd caution, as well as paying attention to the

activist ingredient evident, among many other useful things, in predecessors such as Lifton, Erikson, Coles, and Keniston.

Conclusion

For the Eriksonians, one can act irrationally, according to the standards of ordinary observers, for what turn out upon investigation to be defensible reasons, and one can act irrationally for other than psychological reasons, such as the kamikaze pilots enmeshed in juvenile idealism, patriotic custom, and military compulsion; the cunning or credulous statesman lying about possessing WMD (Saddam Hussein); or the statesmen lying about an enemy's possession of same (Tony Blair and George W. Bush) (see Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). All these can be accounted for in other than psychological terms, and such alternative accounts have to be considered carefully and, if possible, integrated into explanations, which is not and never has been an obstacle for the Eriksonian psycho-historians or, hopefully, their successors. Psychosocial investigations, like psychohistory, should examine the motives behind an overvaluing of fallible explanatory models, including whatever strand of psychology one finds congenial.⁸ Those practitioners, deeply steeped in feminism, queer theory, structuralism, and sundry developments since the psycho-historians' heyday, are likely to be astonished at (and inspired by) the acuity, relevance, depth, and insightfulness of their neglected works if only they crack them open.

Perennially pertinent Eriksonian caveats include: beware of training biases whether one's launch pad is psychology/psychoanalysis or history/social sciences; give predecessors their ample due; and try to exhaust situational explanations before hunting down psychological factors. The psychic depths are not the first or only place to go when structural factors and material interests can account for actions, which does not mean that in cases of overwhelming material pressures psychoanalysis does not have something to offer in explaining choices, as Klein argued (Segal, 1997, p. 29). What is wryly elsewhere dubbed "reversion compulsion" is the unwitting tendency by scholars engaged in multidisciplinary projects to retreat to the methods of their original training, which inhibits psychohistorical or psychosocial work (Jacobsen, 2017b). Making the unconscious tendency conscious is the best anyone can do, trusting that action will follow and will matter. Sorting out what one will do about the "activist ingredient" inherent in these interdisciplinary quests also matters, because it will sooner or later arise as a research issue in a world of extraordinary and increasingly exposed inequities, as exacerbated by the ongoing Covid crisis.

Finally, as Jacoby and lately Ryan remind us, the "left Freudians," even long before the advent of the psycho-historians, vigorously addressed class issues "with complex understandings of the intertwining of the intra-psychic and the social," though clearly not to any decisive or definitive or consensual end (Jacoby,

1983, 1975; Ryan, 2017, p. 137). If we are to reconcile methods in psychoanalysis and social sciences (in which I count history) to illuminate subjects, it would be useful to scour predecessors very carefully before moving on to reinvent conceptual frameworks with which we already are, or ought to be, rolling along. Much like the Eriksonians, the late Robert M. Young (2018) urged psychoanalysts to sidestep the “supposed disinterestedness of the professional and its parent, the scientism of the scientist” in order to acquire a richer grasp of the role of values, and other fields of inquiry, in enhancing what they do (p. 25). Psychosocial studies, at its best, should be a means to that end.

About the Author

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Notes

1. For other unwarranted eclipsings, see McLaughlin (1998) and Jacobsen (2000).
2. The list is far from exhaustive. An anonymous referee of this paper turns out to have attended a session.
3. For an example of kindergarten-level positivism, one might start with the quantification fallacy that whatever one cannot quantify is not important, and its flipside, whatever one can quantify is therefore important, both of which propositions daunt social science studies to this day (Rescher, 1999, p. 235).
4. Rustin (2014) similarly writes that, after the comparatively freer 1970s, “[e]ntry to academic careers is usually now only achievable as a final stage of a long ladder of qualification, which is more likely to establish habits of conformity than dissent. Milieux of apparent improvisation and self-regulation which were to be found in these earlier days, and which at least sometimes facilitated innovation, are now rare in a hyper-regulated world, and in any case carry high occupational risks” (p. 202).
5. Otto Fenichel chided Erikson for slighting issues of class differentiation and discrimination, which the latter heeded to the degree a New Deal liberal could (Friedman, 1999, p. 170).
6. See also the acrid exchange between Mazlish and Coles over Coles’ unsparing review of the shoddiness of Mazlish’s work on Nixon (Mazlish and Coles, 1973). I would add to the brew Mazlish’s book on Kissinger (Mazlish, 1976).
7. The preposterous selectivity of demanding extradition of a foreign journalist under a domestic US Espionage Act, and yet declaring that the First Amendment did not apply to a non-American, is or ought to be self-evident (Cockburn, 2020).
8. On this point, in regard to Kleinians and Lacanians, see Frosh and Baraitser (2008, pp. 360–3).

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