



# Psychohistory in History Education: Between Urgency and Problems

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**Abstract:** Psychohistory is the study of motivation. Learning history in this postmodernist era should not only emphasize patriotism or nationalism. Learners should be more critical and concerned about the inner feelings of fellow humans across time to become moral human beings for the present and the future, without abandoning nationalism and patriotism. The concept of history and psychology or psychohistory can be an important approach to finding out the nature of previous human beings and what the after-effects of this nature are for the level of historical events. This research is a literature study that uses book sources and scientific articles that are relevant and certainly theoretical and empirical. The purpose of this article is to break the old habits by juxtaposing psychology without leaving nationalism through history learning. This article presents the definition, historiography of the psychohistory approach, urgency for students, challenges and contradictions as well as solutions, and manifestations of psychohistory in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Psychohistory, History Education, Psychoanalysis

## Introduction

"What is psychohistory?" is a worthy question to start this article with, as the term psychohistory still sounds unfamiliar in the field of history education, especially in Indonesia. Psychohistory can be defined as the systematic application of the findings and methods of psychology to help behavior and groups from the past and present (Strozier & Offer, 1985). Simplistically, psychohistory combines psychology and history (Belzen, 2013b), which is part of the study of historical motivation (Yolles & Fink, 2021:435).

Motivation (which is also part of psychohistory) is very important in the learning process, including history learning, especially for students at the high school and university levels in Indonesia, which still needs more serious attention (always an urgency or problem in every classroom action research or research and development) or the assumption that history is boring learning. The psychohistorical approach can contribute to learning history without leaving the objectives of this subject, namely the attitude of nationalism and patriotism. Psychohistory is part of psychoanalysis, which offers a unique therapy that is from intellectual experience (Elovitz, 2014).

History learning materials in Indonesia are structured as discrediting the past (such as European colonization), burying the disgrace of national figures (who are considered instrumental to independence), and outperforming a regime (the power of the country's leaders). Does describing so many historical events, complete with the role of the characters, make children able to feel what their predecessors felt? How can children learn abstract events that are not experienced in their lives and are required to memorize them all? This is a basic question in critical pedagogy in history education in Indonesia. Similarly, academics in universities explore the phenomenon of boredom in history subjects and look for solutions.

From the perspective of psychohistorians, history is a set of facts of human history that entirely (happens) consists of what people do, either spontaneously or under the pressure of circumstances, and the development of history seems impersonal, which all boils down to human actions (Binion, 2015). Whereas the



psychoanalytic approach focuses on the individual, psychohistory attempts to uncover common patterns and infer causes of collective motivation and action (Confino, 2018).

Learners (at least adults) in this era of postmodernism are faced with feelings of anxiety, ego, guilt, id, narcissism, paranoia, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), superego, and so on. Although this is a taboo subject in Indonesia, it is a reality that needs to be discussed. We can help their emotions with a psycho-historical approach to learning history at school or university. Psychohistory has the virtue of forcing one to look as consciously as possible at one's feelings, as well as those of the subject (Mazlish, 2017:202).

However, some problems are biased or even contradictory to the science of history (historians), as a presenter of content or material in learning history. For most people, the merging of psychology and history is interesting, but most academic history and psychology departments in America have been hostile to this form of interdisciplinary scholarship (Elovitz, 2014), while in Indonesia, this approach has not yet become an important concern in the world of history education. The focus of psycho-historical learning can include unconscious motivation, coping mechanisms, dreams, emotions, fantasies, personality, and trauma (Elovitz, 2018:66).

For example, in Indonesia, if a psychohistorian says Soekarno was "overthinking" three days before Indonesia's independence as evidenced by his sleeplessness, a historian will dismiss it with just one sentence "That's speculative, provide more objective evidence of your opinion". Psychohistory has good intentions, namely wanting moral learning to students that an Ir. Soekarno also feels what students feel now, and how *The Founding Father* controls his emotions. So it is hoped that there are moral values that students can apply to their lives in the present and future through the psychohistory of Ir. Soekarno. For example, Lord Rosebery once said that the British people wondered whether Napoleon was a good man (Fischer, 1970: 187).

A psychoanalyst like Sigmund Freud, his various attempts at psychohistory were highly speculative (Elovitz, 2018:14). The weakness of historiography that uses explanations from Freud's approach stems from the limitations of psychoanalytic methods and historiographical procedures that are certainly inadequate because they conflict with historical studies, namely the emphasis on hyper sex (libido) and its deterministic (biological) system (Sjamsuddin, 2020:147). However, this does not mean that historians exclude psychological aspects in historiography, because basically history can be a transference for students that is useful for the present and the future they will confront.

"All history must be psychological" (Mazlish, 2017:287). Therefore, a psycho-historical perspective should inform the historian's work. Historian Barbara Tuchman in Elovitz (2014) also says "Every thoughtful historian is a psychohistorian". The implementation of psychohistory in schools and universities is the task of history teachers or history lecturers who can interpret an event, character, or group that becomes a life lesson for learners.

### **Methods and Research Design**

*Methods.* The writing of this article is entirely a literature study and descriptive analysis of the issue of learning history with a psycho-historical approach, as well as explaining the problems contained with relevant theories. The main problem is done by reading about the concepts and theories used to solve the problems in the title. So that by using this literature study method the author can solve the problem to be discussed based on the literature utilized.

*Research Design.* The presentment of the definitive theory of psychohistory and historiography with a psycho-historical approach is the initial substance that needs to be known as a new concept of history learning approach in Indonesia. The author also designs the design of this article on the urgency of psychohistory for students, the challenges and contradictions that will be faced, the solutions offered, and how examples of manifestations of the psycho-historical approach in the classroom. The entire research design is based on relevant literature studies based on the substantial problems described.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **General Definition of Psychohistory**

The most common definition of psychohistory is the application of psychoanalysis to history (Haas, 2021:19; Pawelec, 2020:25). Psychohistory as a motivational science of history focuses on the same historical events that are covered by written history, but the goal of psychohistory is not to describe what happened day by day (Mause, 1982:86). As such, psychohistorical knowledge is the result of collaboration between disciplines, not the fruit of collaboration between psychology and history departments (Elovitz, 2014). For example, while the focus of social history is on power, psychohistory takes a more normative approach (Scott, 2014).

Psychohistory is a concept that has been instrumental in providing a new conceptual framework for advancing the scientific method for the study of historical events. The vision of psychohistory suggests that the concepts of psychology and history when combined will be more insightful, more empathic, and more humane for studying people and groups (Pawelec, 2020:351).

### **Historiography Psychohistorical Approach**

This article is certainly not centered on the method or further elaboration of the historiography of the psycho-historical approach, but only as an introduction to the substance that follows. Historians often also use explanations based on motivation. Explanations based on motivation can be divided into two types, namely, first, as a form of causal explanation, where in this causal explanation the effect is the result of intelligent action, while the cause is the mind behind the action; and second, as a non-causal explanation in the form of a model of patterned behavior (Fischer, 1970: 187; Sjamsuddin, 2020: 147). Case studies are also closely related to psychohistorical studies where individuals are analyzed in terms of their influence on history.



The characteristics of the psycho-historical method according to Kohut (1986) are first, the psycho-historical method relies more on theory, such as psychoanalytic theory. Where figures or events from the past are interpreted in their psychohistorical terms, which is certainly a psychological approach. Secondly, it presents acceptable evidence by citing psychoanalytic literature using contemporary evidence to prove the validity of the theory. This goes back to the "assumption" made that all people are the same regardless of time and place, hence psychoanalytic theory is considered proven for humans in the past. Psychohistory also has a relationship with case studies, where individuals are analyzed in terms of their influence in the historical arc (Junior, 2013). Thus, psychological theories are general laws while contemporary data are historical evidence.

According to Elovitz (2014), a key element of psycho-historical methodology is to examine and investigate the difference between conscious and unconscious intentions. As humans, emotional changes due to trauma or loss are common. As such, psychohistorians must examine this carefully. For example, psychobiographers must carefully analyze an individual's childhood, family background, personality, life trauma, and coping patterns.

Psychobiography can be defined as the systematic application of contemporary scientific psychology to the study of the biography of a (usually deceased) historical figure (Belzen, 2013a). Digging up psychobiographical information is an interview, as psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton did. Lifton considers the search for empirical data can be through interviews, then leads to comparison and boils down to speculation. This interview technique in psychohistory should be modified towards dialog (Lifton, 2000).

### **The Urgency of Psychohistory for Learners**

In essence, humans have a conscience that is manifested in their thoughts, actions, and words. However, the difference is that even as ordinary human beings, not everyone can write their names in history books or change the world with their hands. Academics are too focused on events or the role of certain figures in crossing history in the hope of fostering the attitude of nationalism or patriotism



of students, thus leaving aside an important aspect, namely psychology, especially on moral values in historical events and figures who are ordinary people just like students.

The urgency of why interdisciplinary psychology and history have good prospects for students is because there are psychoanalytic, psychological, psychohistorical, and therapeutic concepts that have entered all aspects of the students' world (Elovitz, 2014).

Reflecting on the Amherst Project, Brown (1996) believes that learners will not only learn "history" but most importantly learn how to learn so that they can continue learning throughout their lives. Brown views that history in the classroom is essentially "utilitarian" in that it is not something to be learned as an end in itself, but as a body of experience that learners must deepen to learn how to learn while growing in the process of life.

As simple as it is today, it is the stuff of psycho-historical thinking. Children grow up in a culture of fear and anxiety that is easily propagated through the internet, that deviant behavior is easy to see and can harm children (Elovitz, 2018:40). Considering these problems, psychohistory can be an alternative to learning history at school.

History learning in Indonesia is faced with varied problems, such as attention to teaching materials, appropriate teaching methods, or learning resources, and the ultimate problem is that history is boring learning. In fact, by learning from history, students can reflect on how important the cultural-educational base is as a lever for national awakening (Latif, 2020: 3). However, it is said to be very unnatural if students are always smoked with material that does not underlie their psychology.

The Greek historian Thucydides (456-396 BC) hoped that history could be considered useful for those who want to gain precise knowledge of the past as an aid to interpreting the future because the problems facing humanity are similar if not duplicative of the past (Sjamsuddin, 2020: 113).

Agreeing with the above, an American historian William L. Langer believes that the basic theory for studying human behavior can be through a more intensive psychoanalysis that underlies the human motivations behind historical events and records, to hopefully provide a more varied interpretation of historical events both individual and group life (Lee, 2020: 60).

The above is by a historian, psychohistorian, and editor of *Clio's Psyche* Peter Loewenberg (1997) that psychohistory can be:

- 1) A therapy;
- 2) A humanist 21st-century outlook that tolerates secularism and human individuality;
- 3) An investigative research method; and
- 4) A way to understand the interaction between people, data, events, and behavior (Elovitz, 2018:58).

Based on the explanation above, when compared in the view of Pancasila education, of course, psychohistory can be the right tool to build the concept of character education for students. Where Pancasila characters are in line with the values of life, namely a variety of universal cultures that underlie good and harmonious relationships between students and people around them (Komalasari & Saripudin, 2018).

### **Challenges and Contradictions**

The psychohistorical approach in historiography is widely doubted because of the subjectivity of the author. In the world of history education, as much as possible, history teachers can present history rationally without involving baseless speculation. History teachers are different from historians, who will certainly be vulnerable to entering the abyss of didactic errors.

Psychohistory itself is not a science because it is a form of history, which certainly has problems that need to be deciphered such as what historical facts are, how we decide what reality to choose, how we understand past actors, how we test the truth and connect evidence with conclusions, and what kind of form is used to express our understanding of the past (Mazlish, 2017: 4).





Like Erikson who wrote a character from Martin Luther with a psycho-historical approach (Lavelle, 2013: 175), if evidence from the past comes from unreliable sources, as long as it does not contradict the facts that have been proven, it still has the meaning of truth so that it produces meaning that is consistent with psychological theory (Kohut, 1986). Someone is said to use a psycho-historical approach if the researcher studies history with a lot of attention to the psychological elements of the historical actors.

By using a psychological approach, historical studies are not only able to reveal symptoms on the surface but are further able to penetrate psychological life, to better understand human behavior and society in the past (Muniroh, 2017). Psychohistorical inquiry requires intensive and meticulous attention to analysis or interpretation, in this case, the individual's personality interacting with the historical context that shapes and is shaped by the individual (Mazlish, 2017:136).

The challenges of psychohistory are largely the same as those of historical inquiry in general, which aims to understand human behavior in terms of time and place, also known as the historical dimension. However, psychohistorians are faced with another problem, namely reducing material to the psychological dimension, which requires knowledge of psychology, especially psychoanalysis.

If we realize the above opinion on the function of history teachers and textbook compilers, it certainly goes through a stage that is not easy. For example, history teachers in Indonesia, during their education in higher education, are more familiar with educational psychology, which studies learning theory. How can history teachers perceive events, figures, or groups correctly in the textbooks they use and then interpret all of these things for students? Of course, the closest job is the compiler of history textbooks who must be able to use psychohistorical methods in textbooks.



## The Solution

To understand the past psychohistorically, researchers must first master the relevant facts and immerse themselves in them as if they were their own and then feel the inner determinants by identifying the original experience (Binion, 2015). The solution offered in this article is for historians, authors of history textbooks for students, and history teachers to pay special attention to psychohistory.

Historians (who are interested in psychohistory) should engage in an intensive collaboration with experienced psychoanalytic clinicians, with the help of the literature on special approaches to psychohistory (Kohut, 1986). In addition, historians should have formal training in psychoanalysis, assisted by psychiatrists or psychoanalysts, and historiography, guided by historiographers (Hofling, 1976), and these activities are mandatory for history textbook authors. In this case, in psychology in history, historians and textbook authors can enrich themselves intellectually with the knowledge of human psychology. Thus, the initial contribution of historians and textbook compilers is the first stone in presenting the content or material in the textbook.

History textbook authors have certainly mastered the research and development of teaching materials that are valid and effective for teachers and students. The validity of the psycho-historical concept can be validated by psychiatrists or psychoanalysts and historians who focus on psychology. Thus, in dissemination, history teachers, in this case, are the mouthpiece of historians to provide psychohistorical understanding to students.

When adopting from Hofling (1976), at least in history textbooks based on the psycho-historical approach, the validity of the material contains the following criteria:

- 1) The economy of formulation, that is, a series of events can be understood by presenting psychology that must be directly proven.
- 2) Consistency in the psychodynamic explanation of a series of events or figures that are certainly with proof or truth.
- 3) Internal consistency, i.e. the direct argumentation of the psychohistorian.



The whole issue of psycho-historical validity falls under the rubric of the philosophy of history (Mazlish, 2017:137).

### **Psychohistorical Manifestations in History Learning**

A psychohistorian who implements the psycho-historical approach in learning history is Paul H. Elovitz. Most of his teaching document is on the issue of war and peace, especially since this material is part of his course (War, Peace, and Conflict Resolution). Elovitz feels that war should not be necessary or even a very last resort for civilized societies. Elovitz teaches his students that fear leads to dehumanization, hatred, and demonization. Uniquely, Elovitz teaches this concept with various techniques and materials, such as watching the movie "The Faces of the Enemy" (1987).

In addition to being invited to watch the movie, Elovitz told his students that war is about killing, which led to the question "Under what circumstances would you kill another human being?". Going deeper, Elovitz asks how it feels after killing and predicts the present or future repercussions of killing others in defense of oneself or one's group. Elovitz's goal in doing this is to indoctrinate students to be less realistic about killing, violence, and unnecessary wars (Elovitz, 2018:68).

Not only in the classroom, but Elovitz also conducts open seminars for his students. For example, on 9/11, he explored the psychology of terrorism, explored the psychological issues of Osama bin Laden or explored the psychology of terrorists who gladly took their own lives. This kind of thing is done by Elovitz to his audience or students that even dark history can be learned, and we can make peace from the past with even bitter history

In addition to the explicit implementation by Elovitz, adapting the psycho-historical concept from the thoughts of Wilson et al. (2001) can also be a reference for history teachers. History teachers can provide three points to learn from past experiences, namely,



- 1) "Mental effort criterion" that they should compare past experiences and their aftermath, rather than just thinking about the future without reference to the past;
- 2) "Applicability criterion" i.e. those who decide which of the many past experiences are most applicable to the future; and
- 3) "Accuracy criterion" means that even though they have recognized which events are applicable and attempted to think about them, it is necessary to accurately recall or reconstruct how they felt after the event.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

This article is not a "groundbreaker" in the arena of history education with a psycho-historical approach, but a pedagogical critique of history learning in Indonesia which is too confined to aspects of nationalism and patriotism. Whereas the era of postmodernism, such as the concept of eco-literacy or "green history" raised by Nana Supriatna (2017) is a very important concern for students to know and must be carried out massively. Both psychohistory and green history are equally important in this postmodernist era and certainly do not abandon the goals of nationalism or patriotism. Before Pawelec, a reference worth reading as a basis for psychohistorical knowledge was the essay anthology "The Leader: Psychohistorical Essays" by Strozier, Charles B. and Offer, Daniel (1985).

It is time for academics from historians, psychohistorians, and history teachers to be aware of the phenomena that permeate the world of students such as feelings of anxiety, ego, guilt, id, narcissism, paranoia, traumatism, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), superego, and so on. The treatment of this disease is certainly not instantaneous, but through learning history with a psycho-historical approach that is packaged starting from the teaching model to psychohistory-based teaching materials, it cannot rule out the possibility of producing variations in classroom learning.

To explore this, the author strongly recommends reading the translated book from Tomasz Pawelec (2020) entitled "History and the Unconscious: The Theoretical Assumptions and Research Practices of Psychohistory". The book fully presents the theory, division of psychohistory, methodology, and practice. Of course, the

practice also refers to Elovitz's success in implementing psychohistory in the classroom and society. In addition, the parameters for measuring psychohistory can use the Extreme Physical Information (EPI) theory which can certainly be a reference for psychohistorians, which is discussed in detail by Maurice Yolles and Gerhard Fink (2021), especially formally in the realm of social psychology.

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