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Paper Three: The Reasons for Creativity, as Described by Creative Minds

The world contains a small quantity of individuals who we deem to be creative, admiring their original ideas which stand out against society’s ideals of conformity and traditions of trained, patterned thought. These individuals are not limited to one field or occupation; creativity is found in every type of person: writers, entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, philosophers, and scientists. Numerous original minds share common urges that manifest themselves in the form of creativity. As screenwriter Graycie Harmon states “writers are just people who have a whole lot on the inside that they need to get to the outside, with pen and paper as their preferred methods of transport. Same with artists and singers – all the same urges with different transportation.” Many of the most famous innovators describe creativity in similar terms, highlighting this shared origin of novel ideas. These esteemed individuals tend to be sensitive, courageous nonconformists who are resilient despite failure, while remaining open to new possibilities; discontent with their world, they are driven by a sense of urgency. Multiple researchers give accounts of the reasons behind these shared characteristics and tendencies, causing the mystery shrouding creativity to be more transparent and tangible. Ultimately, it seems that creativity arises from the discontentment with reality; at its core, whether conscious or unconscious, creativity is an attempt at the solution to a problem.

As Norman Holland claims, humans have a limited amount of energy and attention. The brain is only capable of concentrating on a limited amount of information at one time, necessitating focus. However, as Cathy Davidson states, “no one is born with innate knowledge of how to focus or what to focus on” (5). As a result of the brain’s need for structure, society aids this process by telling us where to direct our attention. Society creates normalcies through organized structures and patterns, encouraging uniformity. Although this organization is largely beneficial, it also inhibits creativity because, as Holland states “if we concentrate on one thing, an important thing, we pay less attention to other things” (48). Davidson explains this same phenomena, stating that it is the fundamental structuring principle of the brain, calling it “attention blindness.” Although this attention blindness may cause us to suffer from lack of variation as the result of patterned thinking, Davidson believes that the human brain is also designed to take in the new when disrupted. We have the ability to learn, then unlearn and relearn. Our brains are plastic, able to quickly adapt to what they need. However, we need some kind of “distraction,” as Davidson states, or a “roadblock,” as Norman Doidge claims, to change the direction of our thoughts. As described by the Pascual-Leone blindfold experiment, the human brain can reorganize itself remarkably quick. Creative minds seem to be better at this process of unlearning and relearning, which is why they are generally believed to be more adaptable than the general population; they are well acquainted with frequently breaking their previous ways of thinking and relearning. In order to unlearn, we must be distracted, having something catch our attention that is outside our normal patterns. Creative people seem to be more prone to these distractions, and therefore, alternate ways of thinking, which produce their novel ideas. Physician Edward de Bono agrees, saying “creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way.” Limitations and structure are necessary for both our brains and society to function, but it is out of these confines that the creative individual produces his innovative ideas. As actress Debbie Allen claims “out of limitations comes creativity.” Creativity is relative. Everything that exists now was once an innovative idea, juxtaposing the rigid confines constructed by society. The world possesses structures. Creative people must then defy these patterns, or as Pablo Picasso states “learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.” The creative individual exists within and understands these structures, then, through the act of rearranging concepts, produces a novel idea that does not conform to society’s preexisting constructs.

Since creative minds push the limitations established by society, they inevitably encounter rejection. As a result, these individuals must be both resilient and confident. Both of the characteristics, Davidson believes, go hand in hand. “Confidence in your ability to learn *is* confidence in your ability to unlearn,” (86) she states, illustrating that resilience and the ability to try again once faced with a roadblock or shortcoming are imperative to successfully undertaking new manners of thinking. Writer Sylvia Plath firmly believes this, claiming “everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy of creativity is self-doubt.” Creative people are confident in their abilities to overcome any challenge that they may face. If they are cannot find the solution to a problem, they feel assured that (as Doidge describes on a neurological level) they will be able to find a new pathway to success. Without this confidence and ability to overcome obstacles, innovative minds would never find success, which is why scientist and inventor Edwin Land states that “an essential aspect of creativity is not being afraid to fail.” Beyond this, we know that creativity arises not just from confidence (which we can understand as a mindset), but from courage (which we can understand to be acting on this confidence). As Nancy Andreason states “a final component of creativity is that it must lead to a *product*” (17). Without the courage to act on ideas, no product would be created and there would be no tangible result of their creativity. Artist Henri Matisse describes this simply, saying “creativity takes courage.”

As described earlier, the ability to give attention to the important aspects of life and filter out the unnecessary is a fundamentally significant quality of the human brain. However, there are some individuals who experience problems with this filtering or sensory gating; Andreason calls this “input dysfunction.” This disability causes those who have it to experience increased sensitivity. The inability to filter out unneeded stimuli is associated with a problem in the thalamus and reticular activating system, which are responsible for this attention designation. “Creative individuals,” Andreason says “have sometimes complained that they are too easily flooded by stimuli, so that they become easily distracted.” (103) Novelist Pearl Buck emphasizes this connection as well, stating “the truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: a creative creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive.” Depression is an alternative manner of dealing with this input dysfunction. Therefore, there is a clear connection between increased sensitivity and depression (or other types of mental illness, such as mood disorders), both of which are frequently self-described characteristics of creative individuals. For example, Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana (one of the first bands to make grunge rock music popular), states “I’m too sensitive,” and “if my eyes could show my soul, everyone would cry when they saw me smile.” Later, Cobain committed suicide, leaving a final note which clearly demonstrated his unhappiness with life. Additionally, Ernest Hemingway, who suffered from depression and bipolar disorder, connects his artistic writing with suffering, saying “there is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”

Similarly, Sigmund Freud notes the connection between creativity and unhappiness, believing day-dreaming to be a continuation of children’s “play,” and understanding play to be the reconstruction of the world for pleasure, as the result of displeasure or lack of fulfillment. Therefore, day-dreaming only occurs in unhappy people. These day-dreams (or fantasies) are gratified wishes, which were created in order to help gain pleasure. Fantasies are triggered by an experience in the present that causes an intense desire for a wish to be satisfied, which the mind then connects to an earlier memory (usually from infancy) where this wish was fulfilled. The mind then creates a situation where the fulfillment of the wish can emerge in the future – this is the fantasy. Therefore, since all fantasies are the result of discontentment with reality, they are essentially the solution to a problem. Since day-dreaming is triggered by present dissatisfactions, it creates this sense of urgency within individuals to satisfy these wishes in order to attain pleasure, explaining why creative individuals feel the urgent impulse to create. Fantasies are often the basis of creative work (as with the poet and his writing), which means that unhappiness is at the foundation of creativity, or as philosopher Eric Hoffer asserts “creativity is discontent translated into arts.” Additionally, it seems that artists share this creation of fantasies, or alternate worlds. Novelist John Fowles believes this, claiming “there are many reasons why novelists write – but they all have one thing in common: a need to create an alternative world.” However, this act of imagining varying realities is not an obscure characteristic of only creative minds. Instead, we all partake in this, as Holland describes “to plan actions, therefore, we imagine situations,” (69) illustrating that in order to act, our brains must imagine the world that we would like to exist. For example, we must think of where we would like to move a chair before we can physically move it, therefore creating an alternate reality prior to action. Neuroscientists call these imagined situations “counterfactuals.” Creative individuals, who tend to be more sensitive than the general population (and therefore, more likely have input dysfunction), are likely to create more of these counterfactuals, explaining their increased production of novel ideas. Furthermore, Andreason explains that creative ideas are part of the brain’s process of making associations by temporarily disorganizing thoughts in order to reorganize them and form new thoughts. She claims that “associations flying through the brain self-organize to form a new idea, the result is creativity” (102). This process of disorganizing and reorganizing, Andreason claims, is similar to that which occurs in depression, further demonstrating the connection between creative individuals and depression or dissatisfaction with reality.

While creativity takes many forms – scientific discoveries, poems, paintings, musical compositions – the characteristics of the creative individuals and the reasons behind their creations are largely the same. Both researchers and innovative minds themselves make similar comments pertaining to these traits. At the core, creativity is the attempt at the solution to a problem. This originality appears to arise from discontentment and unhappiness with reality as it currently exists. Many innovative individuals claim to be sensitive, explaining their inability to filter out excessive stimuli and the resulting increased quantity of creative ideas. Unfortunately, the brain often attempts to cope with this input dysfunction through depression, explaining the connection between unhappiness and creativity. Additionally, in order to find success in their products, these original minds must be resilient; they must be courageous and continue to trudge on despite inevitable roadblocks as the result of society’s imposed limitations. Therefore we can understand creative individuals to be sensitive, courageous nonconformists who seek to find a solution to their discontentment with reality through their innovative ideas and products. At its core, it appears that creativity is the brain attempting to find a solution to a problem.

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