

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CREATIVITY

"I live on the fringe of society, and the rules of normal society have no currency for those on the fringe"

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In the twentieth century it was the Gestalt psychologists who developed the classic and highly influential four-stage theory of human creativity according to which human creativity involves the successive stages of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Preparation is immersion in study and problem solving activities, addressing some fundamental and recalcitrant puzzle for which there is no apparent solution; incubation is leaving the problem alone at a conscious level (as some would argue, letting the unconscious do its work); illumination is the sudden flash of insight where the solution emerges all at once – the parts of the puzzle, the important bits of relevant information come together, in fact, re-configure into a novel "*Gestalt*" or whole; and finally, verification where the presumed solution is critically examined and tested in order to see if it really works (Koffka, 1935; Kohler, 1947).

It is important to note that within this model, creativity involves an initial intense study of the domain, requiring great expenditure of time and energy (and often struggle and frustration) and the trying out of different unsuccessful ways of thinking about the problem—creativity isn't easy and it doesn't come to the naive or unschooled in a domain. Second, the creative insight is a holistic emergence: When it comes it isn't piecemeal; there is rather a dramatic re-organization of consciousness. (This point parallels the ideas of punctuated equilibria and self-organization within the natural science of evolution.) Next, even if the creative flash is intuitive (a holistic realization) the preliminary study and the final stage of verification both involve linear and logical thought processes. The problem must be thought out and the solution must be thought through, using the analytical and rational modes of thinking. Finally, creative acts are often connected with problems, puzzles, challenges, and conundrums. One could say that they are adaptive efforts to deal with the difficulties of life. Creation is a stress-induced problem-solving activity.

Representing opposite poles of psychological theory, Carl Rogers, the humanistic psychotherapist and B.F. Skinner, the behaviorist and experimentalist, once debated in print the pros and cons of their seemingly contradictory positions concerning how best to understand human

psychology (Rogers and Skinner, 1956). Of special note was the question of what would be the ideal environment to support the fully functional, psychologically healthy, and productive human being and, further, what would be the best environment for stimulating human creativity. Though they differed in their responses – Skinner arguing for a highly structured and consistent environment and Rogers emphasizing the importance of positive affect and unconditional positive regard being given to people – it is fascinating that ultimately both of them agreed that it is love and affection (or for Skinner positive social reinforcement) that engenders creativity within people.

Hence motivation and even emotional affect seem to play a significant role in human creativity, above and beyond simply cognitive processes and capacities. Further, creativity is not something that simply goes on "*in the head*" – at the very least, it appears to be nourished and provoked by certain environmental conditions.

In the late 1950s, Skinner's operant conditioning explanation of human behavior became the object of a highly critical assault that bears on the creativity issue. The linguist, Noam Chomsky, argued that human language is a highly creative act structured by abstract syntactical generative rules; it is not something that can be explained as a set of learned habits (Chomsky, 1959, 1966). Almost all human linguistic utterances are creative in the sense that they are not replications of expressions heard before; rather they are invariably novel. Knowing a language is to know a set of generative rules that allows one to create a potentially infinite number of grammatically correct unique sentences. From Chomsky's perspective, at least regarding language, all humans are creative; it is not something reserved for a select few.

References:

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