Update: The Ideology of Creativity

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Abstract: *Ten years ago I wrote Worldmaking: Psychology and the Ideology of Creativity, tracing the ideological functions of the concept over time. The world and the psychology of creativity have changed. From developmental, sociocultural, and complex systems perspectives, how can we understand and respond to the upheavals in the political, environmental, and technological landscapes, which are emerging alongside, destabilizing social fragmentation and intensified geo-political conflict?*
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This paper is meant to open up questions that are not usually addressed at creativity conferences – rather uncomfortable questions about what we are doing. To begin, I would like to cite some quotations from other thinkers, statements that I find particularly apt to my subject here. I have just finished a book that features the life and thought of the 20th-century anthropologist, communications theorist, and systems thinker Gregory Bateson. In his last book, *Angels Fear* (Bateson & Bateson, 2005), written with his daughter Mary Catherine Bateson, Gregory wrote this about people like many of us:

> It seems that every important scientific advance provides tools which look to be just what the applied scientists and engineers had hoped for, and usually these gentry jump in without more ado. Their well-intentioned (but slightly greedy and slightly anxious) efforts usually do as much harm as good... But the hungry, overpopulated, sick, ambitious, and competitive world will not wait, we are told, till more is known, but must rush in where angels fear to tread... I distrust the applied scientists' claim that what they do is useful and necessary. I suspect that their impatient enthusiasm for action, their rarin'-to-go... covers deep epistemological panic (Bateson & Bateson, 2005, p. 14-15).

I want for us to think about the epistemic panic in which I believe creativity research has participated, although the panic is far from ours alone. If only because we are "mere academics," other interests have usually led the charge. In working on ecological education projects, I have, however, been struck by the lack of epistemological explanation of how a crisis almost entirely produced by the creative breakthroughs, from the industrial age onward, somehow calls for ever more creativity as the solution. Obviously, innovations may be helpful going forward, but attention to the values that got us here as well as the traditions that were swept aside in the process would seem to be in order. In recounting the history of the concept of creativity Robert Paul Weiner (2000) saw a more general epistemic panic. He contended that we have tried to respond to a crisis of postmodern uncertainty with the idea of creativity.

This brings us to Weiner. My thinking on creativity as ideology has a number of antecedents. One inspiration for this way of thinking came from Weiner's 2000 book, *Beyond Creativity: Cultures, Values and Change.* Like some other intellectual historians who have studied the history of our concept (e.g., Mason, 2003; Pope, 2005), Weiner came to see creativity as a social value, rather than a trait or process or product, etc. Again, paralleling other scholars' work, he noted that this value of creativity as an absolute good emerged over the course of the18th and 19th centuries in Europe and America, alongside other emerging concepts, including individualism, genius, culture, capitalism, and democracy. (The word "creativity" itself was coined by a Shakespeare scholar in 1875, but the idea of creativeness as an often dangerous but sometimes useful phenomenon is older. Think Faust's bargain with the devil [von Goethe

1808/2015] or Mary Shelley's story of Dr. Frankenstein [Shelley, 1818/2018] – both early 19th-century cautionary tales about creative work. See Mason, 2003; Weiner, 2000 for further discussion.) Weiner's point about the co-emergence of these ideas is important for us in considering the ideological functions of our current concept of creativity. This point also brings us back to Bateson (1972b) who contended that ideas evolve within ecologies of related, juxtaposed, contested, and presumed concepts. He was particularly concerned about ideas that go out of circulation, becoming presumptions which other ideas had then accommodated as they evolved.

Today, there is evidence that our value of creativity holds such a presumed place as unquestioned good. The situation is a bit more complex, though. At the end of Weiner's history of the path of creativity from concept to ideology, he described a cause-effect relation in which, amid the ever-accelerating change cheered on by this ideology, creativity itself becomes a necessity:

> increasingly we find ourselves as refugees, alienated and uprooted from the familiar. That is why creativity is no longer even a choice – we feel obliged to create ourselves and choose our values…. Indeed, unless we adopt ready-made doctrine… deciding upon or discovering what are values are is itself a creative process. This is in fact our primary challenge, I think (Weiner, 2000, p. 167-8).

That challenge is our topic.

My Own Path

In complex systems there are multiple causes and effects. Weiner's book and other's works inspired me to explore ideology as a way to think about the problems that the no-holds-barred promotion of creativity posed. I also had more immediate reasons. Over decades of teaching creativity theories to teachers, first-hand experiences made the view of creativity as ideology particularly compelling. During my own research in classrooms and with youth development programs, I had seen that, sometimes, directing a class to be creative can support good education, encouraging students to explore unusual ideas as they engage their subject matter. But the absolutism with which the paeans of creative rhetoric celebrate their subject can also have other effects. Novelty, even in the superficial form of free association, becomes an end in itself. In education, this approach can come with an opportunity cost in precious time and energy not devoted to deep understanding of the fields being studied. There is also a more general misdirection in over valuing the novel for its own sake, telling students – and convincing ourselves as educators – that simple brainstorming is learning.

At one point a graduate student asked me for help when she was called into a teacher-parent conference to discuss her daughter's work in school. The daughter was a straight-A student who loved school, but the teacher was concerned that the girl did not perform well in brainstorming sessions and that her detailed, clearly

presented, and accurate portfolio did not show sufficient creativity. As creativity researcher Edward P. Clapp (2017) at Harvard's Project Zero has argued, an effect of making creative performance, conceived as mere ideation, an evaluated outcome of school is to construct a new way for students to fail. Indeed, when we look at the functions of the term creativity in everyday discourse, we find that it often is used to divide groups between the creatives and the traditionalists, the creatives and the quants, the creatives and the "suits," the creative educators and those "other" teachers, the generative people and the "merely" reproductive, scholarly, or traditional people (see discussion, Hanchett Hanson, 2015).

In addition, the creativity theorists themselves pointed me toward the ideological roots of this concept. J. P. Guilford's famous speech to the American Psychological Association in 1950 reflected the panic of the United States citizens in the early years of the Cold War. Guilford's audience was composed mostly of psychometricians and behaviorists. "Creativity" was far from their lines of research. He justified his bold call for the study of creativity in order to build the strength of American government and industry. It was necessary for the United States to identify the children who were exceptionally creative and prepare them for leadership positions. In the urgency of the moment, Guilford also and rather shockingly devalued the roles of people whom he did not deem as creative, comparing the economic contributions of each paradigm-breaking creative mind to "the dozens of others [who] merely do a passable job on the routine tasks assigned to them" (Guilford, 1950, 446). Such a dichotomy struck me as a dangerously simplistic, us-versus-them perspective.

Note that Guilford's stated goals involved government and industry, nationalism and capitalism. These lines of argument continued as more and more theorists found reasons to study creativity with a variety of theories. The humanistic psychologists were particularly explicit. Carl Rogers (1961/1989) advocated entirely self-directed education as a way to establish American intellectual dominance in the world, bemoaning the fact that American thinkers had long been overshadowed by Europeans. He never explained why this radically individualistic approach to education would elevate Americans when the Europeans had seldom had such educations. Today, we have evidence that self-directed learning can be very important in the right contexts, usually when thoughtfully integrated with more traditional pedagogical approaches. Self-directed learning is, however, far from the magic bullet of the early hyper-individualistic visions.

As was his style, Abraham Maslow (1954/1970; 1971/1993) was even more extreme and explicit in seeing creativity as a Cold War strategy. Maslow was an ideological warrior, wanting to attract unaligned nations to American values in contrast to the Soviet Union's worldview. Ironically, though, his own vision openly called for social engineering, the development of "Heraclitian" people (1971/1993, 57) who would be endlessly open to change. In his posthumously published

private journals he referred to those who met his ideals as "aggridants" (Maslow, 1982, 231, 340) and explained that those who did not rise to those standards should be encouraged to die off. Indeed, throughout his work, he expressed repulsion in describing people who did not "self-actualize" in accordance with his vision (e.g., Maslow, 1954/1970). As I noted earlier, ironically given the rhetoric and goals of many well-intentioned people, a common function of our concept of creativity is to separate people.

Fast forward to the later 20th century. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 1999) comes out of the University of Chicago with his sociocultural systems view of creativity. Unlike the humanistic ideologues, who celebrated American individualism, Csikszentmihalyi was working in, and contributing to, an ecology of ideas of a different time. He took creativity out of the individual, placing it in the dynamics between *individuals* coming up with ideas, the established sign systems of the *domains* of work, and the *field* of people evaluating the ideas. Here, the field was particularly important, having the last word on which novel notions are creative and which are simply weird or foolish. This was a groundbreaking move in the history of our thinking about creativity. Concerning fields, Csikszentmihalyi emphasized the importance of long-term views and constant vigilance. He cited Jonas Salk is holding up the goal of becoming "wise ancestors" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 325) – a goal that applies to everyone with influence in fields.

At the same time, this sociocultural systems model was very conservative and in line at least with the capitalist line of reasoning set down decades earlier by Guilford. In Csikszentmihalyi's view the field was composed of established institutions and sometimes mass markets which determined what was creative. Fields could, of course, be short-sighted. Csikszentmihalyi worried that they often were, but they also changed their evaluations. In spite of his own interests in both social systems and individual happiness (see discussion, Hanchett Hanson, 2015), there was little interest in grass-roots change. Children in a classroom or people in a family might be brilliant and original in their ideas and work but not "creative." A failed revolt was not creative not matter how distinctive the vision or the methods. Creativity was always some form of success, lauded over the long term in intellectual, artistic, and/or economic markets. The theory had changed, but the objectives continued to align with Guilford's original vision – a way for people and nations to get ahead with an implicit bias toward market-based approaches.

Were these theorists or today's creativity advocates the great villains of Modernity run amuck? Not at all. Like us, they were people of their times, shaped by and shaping their societies. Guilford is somewhat mis-credited with proposing the concept of divergent thinking, which advanced a very simplified, individualist view of creativity reduced to ideation, a view that persists to this day. He never said that his public musings about a cognitively divergent aspect of personality was supposed to define creativity, however. The famous 1950 speech was a shot

across the bow in his long-term, laudable attempt to discredit the *g factor* in intelligence testing, a statistical value that had already done much to support colonialist and racist views of humanity. He would go on to define intelligence by 180 factors, a somewhat Quixotic attempt that would never completely overcome statistical as well as practical challenges (see discussion, Hanchett Hanson, 2015; Weisberg, 2006). Carl Rogers devoted his life to bringing respect to the people with whom psychologists interacted (e.g., Rogers, 1951), and Csikszentmhihalyi's work in positive psychology showed that he really wanted to make people's lives richer and more fulfilling, even though – like all concepts – his perspective had limits and unexpected implications (Hanchett Hanson, 2015). Maslow... well, that's another story (see Hanchett Hanson, 2019).

Closer to home, my own mentor, Howard E. Gruber (1972, 1989, 1999) was staunchly opposed to views of creativity as mere ideation and somewhat skeptical about the construct of creativity as a whole (Grisanti, 1997). In the end, though, he became a renowned creativity researcher, applying Jean Piaget's (Gruber's mentor) views of systemic, normative, child cognitive development to lifelong creative development. In that view, what develops in creative development is a new point of view, and it is the *integration* of new ideas into existing cognitive structures that is the creative work, never simply having ideas. Furthermore, he defined creativity itself as a kind of work, the organization of available resources toward a creative purpose that itself emerges through the work, a feedback loop. This developmental view may sound like an extension of creativity as ideation. It took me years of working with the developmental perspective to realize just how different it is. Yes, having lots of interesting ideas and integrating new ideas meaningfully into a point of view can overlap, but more often they lead us to very different concerns about our topic.

Indeed, from this developmental perspective, lots of ideas without integration is not creative at all. Whether considering individual cognition or larger social systems, overwhelming a system with novelty that cannot be integrated is, if anything, the opposite of creative (see discussion Hanchett Hanson et al., in press). There are always winners and losers, but, as a developmentalist, I suggest that if a novelty and its pace of integration into the social fabric cannot occur without significant harm to many members of the society or to the social system itself, the change may be profitable for some or geopolitically savvy, but it is not creative. Furthermore, with Csikszentmihalyi's "wise ancestor" goal in mind, awareness of all of the harm done and ongoing modulation of the integration of novelty is all of our jobs as members of fields. Over time, that becomes the lion's share of creative work.

My own ideas build on Gruber's, and every day I find new inspiration in the breadth and profundity of his thinking. He was also a man of his times, though, and his own unbridled enthusiasm for individual creativity can also make me wince.

Our Challenge

Like all of the theorists discussed above, we are people of our times. I am not the only creativity researcher to note the extent to which the concept of creativity has influenced the early 21st-century zeitgeist (e.g., Craft, 2005), nor alone in seeing creativity as ideology (in addition to Weiner, see, for example, Raunig, Ray & Wuggenig, 2011; Rehn & De Cock, 2009; Runco & Albert, 2010). Like creativity, ideology is a concept with varied definitions from different theorists (for example, Foucault, 1969/1998; Freeden, 2003; Žižak, 1989/2009). Use of the various views of ideology to analyze the concept of creativity is a fascinating and promising challenge itself but not our topic today. Note however: having an ideology is not necessarily bad. A number of theorists see ideologies as necessary. We can and should talk about the specific ideological functions of the concept of creativity, positive and negative from different perspectives in specific contexts. Those analyses could conceptualize creativity as serving ideologies, rather than as an ideology *per se*. But such limited analyses might not capture the reach of our idea of creativity. It has often aligned with neoliberal agendas, but those ties are far from exclusive. The value of creativity has been adopted by people with many worldviews and socioeconomic objectives. I build my own view of our ideology on Karl Mannheim's (1929/1954) analysis of ideology as a *total conception*, a worldview that affects almost all aspects of life, as opposed to *particular* conceptions that apply only to specific situations.

From this perspective, we both function within and continually contribute to our ideologies, influencing their evolution. We are thus faced with the task of recognizing problematic practices from within the very ecology of ideas that gave rise to them. Here, creativity comes with some particularly interesting twists. For, the value of creativity has come to include questioning assumptions, exactly what I am calling for today concerning the idea of creativity itself.

My conclusion: we must now work – take account of our resources and organize them to address our problems, including those in which we have had a hand. As harsh as I may sound concerning our field, I myself have come to the issues I raise by teaching the history of theories of creativity. As I have seen and the work of Weiner and other intellectual historians has shown, this concept can change dramatically over relatively short periods. I am not advocating an extreme about-face, replacing neophilia with phobia, a rigid enforcement of narrowly conceived traditions, rather than a view of adaptively evolving traditions. We see such extreme rigidity in places in the world today which at other times in history were flourishing centers of intellectual, scientific, and artistic advancements. The systems theorists in me assumes that those rigid societies are developing along with and in part in response to our neophilic frenzy. We are all part of the same global system. The challenge for creative work is then how to identify and

organize resources that we get out of this split with the least amount of harm to the people and systems involved.

The Update: 2015-2024

When I wrote *Worldmaking* in 2014-2015, the international neoliberal order was showing cracks but still quite dominant. The global recession of 2007-2009 included a few warning signs at least in unbridled innovation in a largely unregulated financial market. Remember those clever credit-default-swap derivatives? Social networking platforms, those wonderful ways to connect with old friends and share photos of grandchildren were just about 13 years old. Serious problems aggravated by social media – for example, cyberbullying and facilitating sexual predators – had arisen, but the threat to destabilization democracies was not (quite) yet mainstream knowledge.

I write this article a few weeks before the 2024 American elections. Whatever the result, the mere facts of the current split in the American society, including the legitimacy of far-right perspectives, speaks to the kind of widespread alienation and disintegration of social fabric that Weiner and I have described and that many people across disciplines and walks of life have wanted to avoid. As we all know, today such social and polarization is not particular to America, and each case has its own contextually-specific factors at play, *many* of them. In part, though, we are seeing responses to a world where people struggle to integrate wave after wave of change, most making a few very rich while everyone else sinks in an ever less familiar and more alienating world. The old neoliberal solutions are not selling, and the current alternatives are frankly quite frightening for many of us. Paradoxically, we need creative solutions, but our own ideology of creativity is part of the problem.

Let us keep our perspective, though. Will a change in our views of creativity solve all of our social-political-military-climatic problems? Of course not. Complex social systems are, well, too complex for that. The ideology of creativity with its enthusiasm for ever-accelerating rates of change, its devaluation of the people who "merely" keep the world running, its illogical dismissal of the very traditions into which novelty needs to be integrated, and its frequent cozy relationship with failing neoliberal agendas – this often unquestioned ideology is not the only or likely the most immediate driver in any particular situation. I must then admit that, even though we have made our contributions to the problems at hand, a change in direction might have little effect at this point. So many forces have come together in the global social fragmentation, resource allocation, and environmental problems we face, that retooling the part of the dynamic that the concept of creativity has played may be too little, too late.

On the other hand, I am a creativity researcher, and, for me, the most important impact of studying and teaching these ideas has been an enhanced sense of the

possible. The complex systems that compose our lives and societies are often shockingly surprising. My students and I have studied many life trajectories of people who have done extraordinary creative work – developed profoundly different points of view over time by integrating multiple ideas that ultimately affect the larger world. At the early stages of most of those lives, the rest of the story as it unfolded would seem laughably unlikely. It is then also within our ideology to allow the possibility of the highly improbable – to be keenly aware of the incredible unpredictability of much of life. We thus do not know where our ideas about creativity might lead.

Some Possible Approaches

Earlier, I proposed that both our immediate problems and our ideology of creativity call for some creative work. What would that mean? Weiner thought that we have to go beyond the idea of creativity. If so, then our job is to loosen our own and then others' irrationally exuberant grip on the current ideology and be attuned to the emergence of new, more balanced and promising concepts. Here, I will resort to a quote from another of my favorite theorists. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu also looked at the dynamics of fields, primarily in the reproduction of social hierarchies. In that work, he also studied dramatic changes in fields. He noted that major changes require that the conceptual structures and social dynamics of the field already be in place "like *structural lacunae* which appear to wait for and call for fulfillment [italics in original]" (Bourdieu, 1995, 235). From that perspective, we face the challenge of being sufficiently attentive to and well-versed in our own field to see the potentials for change.

From another angle, Bateson had a word for integration of change that at once took into account the participants and systems as a whole. Aligning with Csikszentmihalyi's quest for the "wise ancestor," Bateson called that *wisdom* (Bateson, 1972a). Interestingly, linking the concept of creativity to wisdom has also been advocated by mainstream creativity researchers (e.g., Craft, Gardner & Claxton, 2007; Sternberg 2021).

From yet another angle, our larger ecology of ideas may offer key affordances. Remember that Weiner documented the emergence of the current value of creativity in relation to concepts of individualism, genius, culture, capitalism, and democracy. There are, no doubt, even more key conceptual links today. Our support of needed evolution of those ideas might prove to be the best way to reorient our own work.

My sense of the unpredictability of social and material systems – life – leads me to assume that parts of any of these approaches may be part of what comes "beyond creativity," but the actual outcome will be largely a surprise. In spite of that expectation, I am going to propose a general strategy for us.

First, I think we have to take a sober look at our topic and see it as one of

ongoing modulation and management – within ourselves, our communities, and our societies – not a continual pursuit of thrills of novelty. Second, use the conceptual tools we have: the developmental perspective that emphasizes integration of novelty, rather than ideation and marketing, and the sociocultural view of all of our responsibilities as members of fields, including researchers, students, and teachers. For, today's good idea in one context can be tomorrow's nightmare in another context or "at scale." Third, the creativity research community has huge amounts of knowledge that can be re-analyzed in relation to contextually specific, long-term integration of ideas. For example, all of the research on individual differences is highly relevant if analyzed as potential value within the dynamics of specific social, material, and technological contexts, rather than decontextualized and generalized about creativity writ large. Fourth, again following Gruber's concepts, *work!* Our community has extraordinary resources in breadth of perspectives, energy and organization, as this and other conferences and associations make evident. In the end, I am not concerned about our community having the necessary resources to revise the ideology. I am, however, wondering whether or not we will. Alternatively, will whatever lies beyond creativity come from another part of the ecology of ideas? If so, will we be sufficiently attentive to recognize the structural lacunae of the moment?

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