

## A Communitarian Approach to Creativity

Jay A. Seitz

*Department of Political Science & Psychology  
York College/City University of New York*

The political and cultural milieu and the differential distribution of power among individuals and groups within a society constrain creative activity in science, art, and entrepreneurship. Standard psychological theories view creativity as arising largely from the unique or extraordinary characteristics of individuals (e.g., mental processes, background knowledge, intellectual style, personality, motivation, etc.), giving voice to social attitudes and beliefs about the folklore of such terms as the *lone genius*, *brilliant inventor*, *estranged artist*, or *ruthless entrepreneur*. In fact, any creative product emerges from a unique coincidence of individual intellectual abilities; the nature and relative sophistication of a scientific, artistic or entrepreneurial domain; the complexity and structure of the field of legitimization; and the distribution of power and resources within a group, community, or society.

### INTRODUCTION

In chapter 4 of Virginia Woolf's (1929) *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator relates a view of great works of art that arises from the combined creative inheritance of the community: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (p. 65).

Such a perspective, however, is not in the mainstream of contemporary views of creative activity. Like contemporary views of the nature of intelligence, the widespread belief among laypersons as well as among social scientists is that creativity largely inheres in the individual and is for the most part a function of individual constitution. Nonetheless, there are notable exceptions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Feldman & Goldsmith, 1986; Gardner, 1993; Granott & Gardner, 1994; Runco & Albert, 1990; Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). In this recent collection of inquiries, the individual's relationships with others including those emanating from early childhood, his or her creative surroundings, and the larger cultural milieu are summoned to account for individual creative activity. One approach, for instance, has been to put the creative individual within a multidimensional framework in which genetic and neurobiological substrates, personality and motivational factors, the status of an artistic or scientific domain, and the field of legitimization play a critical role in individual creative production (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Feldman & Goldsmith, 1986;

Gardner, 1993). Other perspectives have emphasized how personality, motivational, and contextual factors as well as larger cultural and historical forces bear on creative activity (Runco & Albert, 1990; Simonton, 1984, 1994, 1999; Sternberg & Lubart, 1991; Sulloway, 1996). Although each of these perspectives has gone to great lengths to emphasize the embeddedness of human creativity, there has been a lack of attention in the literature to the communal basis of creativity and to the impact of the distribution of power and resources within a group, community, or society on creative expression and production. This latter view proposes that creativity is politically and culturally embedded and derives from the combined inheritance of the community.

### COMMUNITARIANISM AND CREATIVITY

Recent advances in political theory suggest that self-determination develops through extant social and cultural practices, social roles, and cultural and political institutions (Avineri & de-Shalit, 1992; Bell, 1993; Elshtain, 1995; Friedman, 1994; Kymlicka, 1990, 1993; Lasch, 1995; MacIntyre, 1984, 1995; Sandel, 1984; Sayers, 1995; Taylor, 1994). The individual is seen as situated within a social, political, and cultural matrix, and it is this influence that shapes people's unique preferences, personal choices, distinctive creativity activity, and individual creative pursuits. This communitarian view has a number of core premises (Avineri & de-Shalit, 1992). First, human behavior is best understood within its historical, political, and cultural contexts. The intersection of these contexts defines a community. A community is a shared culture or body politic with a common set of values, norms, preferences, and aims; a collective history; and a set of defining beliefs and practices that each individual shares and sees "as a good in itself." These are the preconditions of personal autonomy and creative activity. Second, such communities are important because they support and encourage the involvement of individuals within the larger public sphere as well as promote the creation of voluntary associations among community members. Noncommunitarian relationships and alliances exist outside this sphere, but principally through market relations. In contrast, state and permanent government bodies cannot be a prerequisite for creative autonomy because of the relative inflexibility of their institutional functions as well as their distance from the content of communities' ideas and values.

Creative activity is the consequence of the confluence of cultural domains and political and social institutions that directly and indirectly influence the development of individual creative expression and not merely the result of intraindividual factors (e.g., individual creative abilities or genetic endowment; Jamison, 1995). To be sure, in contemporary liberal cultures, human creative activity is shaped by "recognition, misrecognition or its absence" in relation to acknowledgment or lack of it from others (Taylor, 1994). Creative products, therefore, are always a community affair, the result of the combined individual intellectual and creative profiles of numerous individuals, the history of creative ideas and their application in the domain, and the field of cultural and political forces that serve their legitimization.

A poignant illustration of deep community involvement in creativity is the world of cinematic film that draws on the resources of playwrights, their ubiquitous editors (often with the byline "adapted screenplay"), directors, actresses and actors, producers, art directors, lighting designers, special effects personnel, electricians, property masters, stunt teams, makeup crews, and many others. Their work draws on other artistic works in the genre of the domain, and the film sinks or swims depending on ticket buyers, print and nonprint movie reviewers, advertising and marketing

budgets, distribution rights, and a host of other factors. Large social enclaves involving businesses, organizations, and institutions grow and develop around these thriving industries (e.g., “Hollywood” or “Wall Street”).

These social enclaves have features of two core species of historical communities, namely, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tonnies, 1887/1963). The former represents an organic community that is marked by birth, kinship, and shared habitat and locality, as well as common beliefs and attitudes, experiences, feelings, and dispositions. The latter represents specific private interests or so-called “partial communities” that include trade unions, professional associations, occupational groups, and so forth (Plant, 1987). Nonetheless, these social enclaves possess strong communitarian features. For instance, “Wall Street” suggests a shared habitat and locality, collective entrepreneurial and social goals, and common beliefs and attitudes, as well as a group of individuals who possess common education, training, and experiences related to their occupational group.

Moreover, the communities and environments with which an individual interacts act as cultural amplifiers (Bruner, 1996), augmenting certain cultural practices (e.g., screen or television acting, use of junk bonds) and not others (e.g., classical theater, investing in treasury bills). Yet, most important, these communities involve other individuals, domains of knowledge established over historical time, and the constraints placed on the individual by political and social institutions. Indeed, if human reasoning is fundamentally bound up with the political, cultural, and social practices of a community (e.g., Cole & Scribner, 1981), that is, is socially and culturally embedded, then from a communitarian perspective, an individual’s creative activity is probably more heavily influenced by exposure to divergent social enclaves of everyday life and the languages and cultural practices of the community than by any inherent genetic or biological potential (Feinberg, 1995; Tomasello, 1999).

#### POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CREATIVE ACTIVITY

Current research on creativity provides strong support for the communitarian view: (a) Creative individuals engage in a broad, interconnected network of endeavors with other individuals within communities of association (Gruber & Davis, 1988); (b) childhood experiences, including relations with siblings in the family as well as proximate and distal relationships with others in later life, play a pivotal role, particularly interactions with informal and formal educational institutions (Gardner, 1993; Simonton, 1984; Sulloway, 1996); (c) both the microenvironment, the immediate creative context, and the macroenvironment, the social, cultural, political, and institutional context, facilitate creative production by enabling individuals to make imaginative connections within and across disparate domains of experience (Seitz, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2003, in press); and (d) dominant elites within a society tend to suppress creative activity and initiative in order to secure the advantages of the status quo (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). A disquieting example of the latter is the curtailing of individual grants by the National Endowment of Arts in the 1990s by an array of entrenched political forces. To be sure, the creator draws his or her creative nourishment from the vitality and richness of the community, which explains why so many creative individuals are drawn to metropolitan and urban centers with their deep and extensive cultural, artistic, entrepreneurial,

and intellectual resources. Creative accomplishments in any field, moreover, stand atop the often unacknowledged earlier labor of many distinct contributors (Seitz, in press).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although intraindividual elements are no doubt important in creative activity, recent developments in the study of creativity and creative activity suggest the profound influence of the creative domain, the field of legitimization, and the co-incidence of many political and cultural variables on the efflorescence of creative activity. Among the most significant, the differential distribution of power and resources among individuals and groups deeply constrains creative activity in art, science, and entrepreneurship (Seitz, in press). This is so because creative activity emerges from communities of association whose lingua franca is political and social capital, not merely human capital. Communities establish the preconditions for personal autonomy and creative activity (Seitz, in press). I further suggest that the fundamental unit of culture is community (as defined above). Communities facilitate the internalization of culture through ongoing relationships among individuals including the sharing of experiences, dispositions, and feelings; through the inculcation of beliefs, values, and norms; through the shaping of individuals by occupational and institutional practices; through communal preferences that evolve within an organic or partial community; and through the encouragement of voluntary associations, education and training, and participation in the public sphere. Nongovernmental institutions accomplish this most effectively because of the close ties between individuals and the institution's cultural practices. Indeed, sociogenesis (i.e., collaboration with others resulting in the creation of cultural artifacts and practices) and cultural learning have been increasingly demonstrated to enter into the very fabric of human cognition and its development (e.g., Cole, 1996; Tomasello, 1999). Nonetheless, it is not cultural-historical processes writ large that affect creative activity but opportunities to develop and practice one's creative craft within a community of like-minded individuals. The centrality of community, therefore, lies at the core of discussion of creativity and creative activity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the belated influence of the late Professor Sylvia Scribner whose graduate school tutelage is only now being appreciated in creative activity.

## REFERENCES

- Avineri, S., & de-Shalit, A. (Eds.). (1992). *Communitarianism and individualism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, D. (1993). *Communitarianism and its critics*. Oxford, England: Clarendon.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, M., & Scribner, S. (1981). *Culture and thought: A psychological introduction*. New York: Wiley.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1988). Society, culture, and person: A systems view of creativity. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 362–385). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Elshtain, J. B. (1995). *Democracy on trial*. New York: Basic Books.
- Feinberg, W. (1995). The communitarian challenge to liberal social and educational theory. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 70(4), 34–55.
- Feldman, D. H., & Goldsmith, L. T. (1986). *Nature's gambit: Child prodigies and the development of human potential*. New York: Basic Books.
- Friedman, J. (1994). The politics of communitarianism. *Critical Review*, 8, 297–340.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Creating minds: An anatomy of creativity seen through the lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*. New York: Basic Books.
- Granott, N., & Gardner, H. (1994). When minds meet: Interactions, coincidence, and development of domains of ability. In R. J. Sternberg & R. K. Wagner (Eds.), *Minds in context: Interactionist perspectives on human intelligence* (pp. 171–201). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gruber, H., & Davis, S. N. (1988). Inching our way up Mount Olympus: The evolving systems approach to creative thinking. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity* (pp. 243–270). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jamison, K. R. (1995, February). Manic–depressive illness and creativity. *Scientific American*, 272, 62–67.
- Kymlicka, W. (1990). *Contemporary political philosophy: An introduction*. Oxford, England: Clarendon.
- Kymlicka, W. (1993). Community. In R. E. Goodin & P. Pettit (Eds.), *A companion to contemporary political philosophy* (pp. 366–378). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Lasch, C. (1995). *The revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy*. New York: Norton.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1995, March–April). The spectre of communitarianism [Review of the book *Communitarianism and its critics*]. *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 70, 34–35.
- Plant, R. (1987). Community. In D. Miller (Ed.), *The Blackwell encyclopedia of political thought* (pp. 88–90). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Runco, M. A., & Albert, R. S. (Eds.). (1990). *Theories of creativity*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sandel, M. (Ed.). (1984). *Liberalism and its critics*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sayers, S. (1995, January–February). The value of community. *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, 69, 2–4.
- Seitz, J. A. (1997a, August). *A communitarian theory of creativity*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, IL.
- Seitz, J. A. (1997b). The development of metaphoric understanding: Implications for a theory of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 10(4), 347–353.
- Seitz, J. A. (1999). Political science and creativity. In M. A. Runco & S. R. Pritzker (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of creativity* (pp. 417–421). San Francisco: Academic.
- Seitz, J. A. (2003). *The neural representation of metaphor*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Seitz, J. A. (in press). The political economy of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*.
- Simonton, D. K. (1984). Artistic creativity and interpersonal relationships across and within generations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 1273–1286.
- Simonton, D. K. (1994). *Greatness: Who makes history and why*. New York: Guilford.
- Simonton, D. K. (1999). *Origins of genius: Darwinian perspectives on creativity*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Sternberg, R. J., & Lubart, T. I. (1991). An investment theory of creativity and its development. *Human Development*, 34, 1–31.
- Sulloway, F. J. (1996). *Born to rebel: Birth order, family dynamics, and creative lives*. New York: Pantheon.
- Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25–73). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tomasello, M. (1999). *The cultural origins of human cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tonnies, F. (1963). *Community and association* (C. P. Loomis, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1887)
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. New York: Harcourt Brace.