Psychological Theorizing on Creativity: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The entire spectrum of mainstream psychological approaches to creativity - from psychoanalytic, to the social psychological approach - represents various hues of the same colour. What binds together these seemingly different approaches is the assumption that creativity is largely an individualistic and intra-psychic phenomenon. This bias manifests itself in psychologists 'efforts to explain creativity in terms of personality characteristics, repressed desires, S-R connections, cognitive operations, life events, or environmental factors. The entire research is guided by the assumption that creativity is an individualistic, self-bound and more or less static attribute of the individual that can be measured with the help of standardized tools. As a consequence, psychological research on creativity has been over-occupied with identification of the 'creative person 'and a concomitant search for valid and reliable tools of measurement. This paper critically examines the 'individual bias' overriding most of the psychological approaches to creativity.

Creativity has long been a matter of interest for psychologists. The socio-political conditions prevalent in Europe post World War II and the rise of Russia as a super-power steered the American interest towards identification of the 'creative talent'. Moreover, the discipline of psychology has long been nurturing a strong individual bias in its theorization of psychological processes. These two forces - the individualistic bias inherent in the discipline, and, the socio-political developments during twentieth century - paved the way for burgeoning of psychological literature in creativity. Some of the major approaches to the study of creativity are discussed in the coming section in the light of the *individual bias* characterizing them.

The first and foremost theorizing on creativity was done by Sigmund Freud (1908) conceptualized creativity as an attempt on the part of the creative writer to 'sublimate', or give a socially acceptable expression to her/his infantile desires. Later on object relations described creativity in terms of the creative person's relationship with the objects in one's early life. Both, Freudian and Object relational approach (Greenacre 1957) view creativity in terms of the intra-psychic processes characterizing the creative individual's early life.

Another major approach to creativity research led by the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) (MacKinnon 1975) studied the *creative personality* focusing on personality characteristics which differentiate a creative individual from others. This approach made significant inroads into identifying personality traits, or relatively stable characteristics, of creative individuals. This approach studied creativity with an assumption of creativity as an individual pursuit, thus failing to recognize creative individual's connect with her/his society.

The cognitive approach studied creativity in terms of cognitive processes operating within the creative individual. The classic contribution by Wallas (1926) which was later elaborated upon by others (Hutchinston, 1949; Patrick, 1935, 1937, 1938; Weisberg, 1988) highlighting stages in the creative process looks at creativity as a mental process happening on the inside of a human being.

Another major approach, the biographical approach (Pritzker, 1999) studied the life of creative people with an effort to identify mental health problems among them. The focus of this approach seemed to be categorizing creative people into categories of disorders, especially mood disorders. While lacking appreciation for creative people's uniqueness, this approach rather consolidated on generalizations about the creative personality.

Lastly, the social psychological approach (Amabile, 1983a,1983b, Simonton 1975, Martindale 1989) while attempting to study the impact of social variables on creativity reduced the social environment to 'variables' such as work climate (Ekvall and Tangeberg-Andersson 1986; Amabile 1983b). A major limitation of this approach rests in its treatment of the creative person and the environment as separate entities. This approach did not consider the relationship between creative individual and her/his environment, rather reduced both in terms of measurable quantities.

Mooney (1963, cited in Taylor 1988) has listed "four significantly different approaches to the problem of creativity", as follows:

1. the creative environment (the environment in which the creation comes about)
2. the creative product
3. the creative process
4. the creative person

According to Mooney (1963, cited in Taylor 1988) these areas have guided most of the psychological research on creativity including his own.

It is interesting to note here that psychological research has been divided among the four areas listed above and more often than not, these have been treated as clearly distinct and separate from each other. The examination of these four areas as distinct from each other is erroneous, and rests on the assumption of the individual - environment binary. It is assumed that the creative individual is separate from the environment in which s/he creates. Further the creative process and the creative person cannot be sen as separate from each other.

Within the areas listed by Mooney, we find that the creative person has been most deserving of psychologists 'interest. The creative process, creative environment and the creative product have been relegated to the periphery of psychological interest. The individual ontology that has dominated mainstream creativity research renders creativity the status of a fixed, self-bound, individualistic and most importantly for scientific purposes, a measurable entity. Even in their efforts to grasp the creative process, most of the psychological theorizing has been intra-psychic in nature. Though social and environmental factors have been incorporated in the research on creativity, these 'factors 'are limited to being essentially independent variables whose impact on individual creativity has been studied. The study of creative products has received the minimum attention form psychologists. And it needs mentioning that psychological research on creativity has serious ideological implications in so far as it perpetuates a distinction between creative and non-creative individuals. It is self evident that such a distinction is perspectival and not absolute in nature.

There is no doubt about the fact that the discipline of psychology that claims to be more than a century old has till recent times been marching on with the assumption of 'individual 'being an a priori which is quite evident in its research questions, methodology and applications. It is not surprising then, that creativity too has been conceptualized and researched with the same assumptions. The 1950 presidential address to the APA by Guilford gave impetus to individual bias in creativity research in particular.

As a consequence of *individual bias* guiding major psychological theorizing in creativity, what gets lost is the cognizance of creative person's relationship with her/his social milieu. The narrow perspective of considering creative person as separate from his/her social, cultural, political and economic context has led to an intra-psychic understanding of the creative person as well as the creative process. Therefore we need to be incorporate in our understanding of creativity an appreciation of the creative person's relationship with her/his social and cultural context.

The conceptualization of *creative person* in terms of personality characteristics as a result of the individual bias guiding most of psychological theorizing neglects the experiential aspects of the creative process. Therefore alternate research methods for phenomenological enquiry of creativity is the need of the current times.

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