**Creativity and Cultural Production: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Creativity Through an Ethnographic Study of Songwriting.**
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## Introduction

There are two pervasive views of creativity that still have some general circulation. One of these could be labeled the *inspirational* view and the other the *romantic* view. Margaret Boden has argued strenuously that, 'these views are believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined. They are not theories, so much as *myths*: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears, and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them' (2004:14). Each of these myths has certain elements in common. While the inspirational view can be traced back to the Greek world, romanticism, as Keith Sawyer points out, was a movement that was opposed to rational understandings of creativity and believed instead that artists held a privileged position as the 'epitome of the human spirit' (2006:16). Like the inspirationist views romantics thought the artist should 'simply listen to their inner muse and create without conscious control' (ibid). As Kantian aesthetics would have it, they were thought to work beyond the constraints encountered by mere mortals.

Despite these attractive and persuasive myths still having some credence in the common mind (Sawyer, 2006:17) the research into creativity that has occurred over the last sixty years has provided a radically different view. In the light of this research the following understanding of creativity can be offered. It can be seen as an activity whereby products, processes or ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant unique variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting. This definition has been gleaned from a number of ways of looking at creativity. The disciplinary areas that have contributed to the literature where these ideas were sourced include psychology in all its variants, sociology, philosophy, literary and cultural theory and also work in communication and culture.

## Background to the Study

In terms of an overview of the research literature, only some of which can be touched on here, Howard Gardner (1993) proposed that an investigation of creative persons, products or processes, could be carried out in terms of four perspectives. He listed these as the subpersonal, the personal, the impersonal and the multipersonal approaches. This typology has been useful in examining the research available on creativity, which has been categorised as falling within one or two of these particular areas on a continuum from individual to contextual responsibility.

Early psychological investigations into the nature of extraordinary creators, working within a discursive framework that valorised the Romantic ideal, contended that the psychological state of exceptional innovators was important to their creativity. Researchers such as Lombroso (in Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976) associated the notion of genius, for example, with insanity. Freud saw them as quasi-neurotics (1976). Latter work in this area has eschewed the fundamentals of these ideas. For example, there has been a certain level of investigation by neuropsychologists into the way the brain works and its relationship to the experience of creativity (Suzuki 1994,

Greenfield 2008). Ideas such as left/right brain functions and their relationship to creativity, while still heavily utilised in the public domain, have fallen into disrepute within the research community with cognitive psychologists in particular now tending to 'talk of brain activity in terms of *multilevel*, *parallel* and *recursive processing*' [italics in original] (Pope, 2005:115). In general though, psychology has still concentrated much of its efforts towards an investigation of what the individual contributes to creative practice including work in the psychodynamic, social personality, behaviourist, cognitive and neuro-psychological approaches (summarised in Sternberg 1999, Runco & Pritzker 1999, and Sawyer 2006). But, in a typical Hegelian dialectic, an opposing school of thought has also developed out of these positions. As Dean Keith Simonton explains:

> Psychologists have tended to view creativity as an individual level phenomenon. That is, they have tended to concentrate on the cognitive processes, personality traits, and developmental antecedents associated with individual creators. This focus follows naturally from the very nature of psychology as a scientific enterprise dedicated to understanding individual mind and behaviour. Yet this tradition of "psychological reductionism" has also inspired an antithetical conception of creativity as an exclusively societal-level event. In the extreme form, that is a complete "sociocultural reductionism," the individual becomes a mere epiphenomenon without any causal significance whatsoever. (Simonton, 2003:304)

While psychologists debate these problems and contribute significantly to a large body of empirical research on creativity the discipline of sociology has also supplied some important work to this area (summarised in Zolberg, 1990). A few researchers have challenged the efforts being conducted on the nature of creativity itself disputing, along with other disciplinary areas, the myth of individual genius (Howe 1999). Howard Becker's pragmatic analysis of art worlds (1982) highlighted the difficulty of only considering the individual when investigating the source of various creative works. The assumption that only particular individuals can be credited with a work belies the overwhelming evidence that art is, according to Becker, a collective process. Janet Wolff (1993) also argues strongly for the notion that art is a social product. But perhaps the strongest and most complete work on cultural production in sociology comes from Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1993 and 1996). This work was derived from his efforts to fully understand and illuminate the problems of reconciling agency, that ability to freely act, and structure, the determining frameworks imposed across action, in a social and cultural context. In doing so he introduced the concepts of the *habitus*, *field*, *cultural capital* and *field of works*, as well as a number of others, all of which have been highly useful in understanding how cultural products come to be.

Alongside these efforts lay an increasingly complex and de-centred interpretation of creativity which sprang largely from literary and cultural theory (summarised in Pope, 2005). These reconceptualisations found their apogee in the post-structuralist points of view which cried metaphorically for the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977, Foucault 1979). This phrase was used as a rhetorical device to attempt a displacement of the Romantic view where the responsibility for creativity is seen to be centred solely on the individual, as exemplified by the creator/genius model, a model no longer seen as satisfactory in explanatory terms (Weisberg 1993, Howe 1999, Negus & Pickering 2004).

Meanwhile, philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) insisted that three interconnecting planes exist in which creativity occurs (in Pope, 2005:4-5). These include the creation of concepts by philosophy, the creation of affects or sensory embodiments of possible worlds by art, and finally, the creation of percepts or sensory embodiments of functional worlds by science. What these ideas point to but don't necessarily elucidate, is the notion that creativity does not belong solely to the realm of art or indeed science alone but is in fact a basic human characteristic which may come about as the result of the intersection or confluence of a number of properties. What Robert

Sternberg argues for is the idea that different fields have 'tended to use different terms, however, and focus on different aspects of what seemed to be the same basic phenomenon' (2003:100).

> Were it the case that an understanding of creativity required a multidisciplinary approach, the result of a unidisciplinary approach might be that we would view a part of the whole as the whole. At the same time, though, we would have an incomplete explanation of the phenomenon we are seeking to explain, leaving dissatisfied those who do not subscribe to the particular discipline doing the explaining. We believe that traditionally this has been the case for creativity. Recently, theorists have begun to develop confluence approaches to creativity. (Sternberg, 2003:101-102)

These confluence approaches hold that 'multiple components must converge in order for creativity to occur' (Sternberg, 2003:102). It has been the confluence models of creativity, exemplified by Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (1988,1997) in particular, partially coupled with the similarly complex approach to cultural production presented by Pierre Bourdieu (1977,1984,1993), which I believe provides the most useful working platform to investigate the idea of creativity. As Csikszentmihalyi himself has argued elsewhere (1988:336), this interdisciplinary approach, especially coupling psychology with sociology, would be the most fruitful:

> It seems to me that an understanding of the complex context in which people operate must eventually enrich our understanding of who the individual is and what the individual does. But to do so we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the center of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 336)

The systems model, in particular, thus forms the basis of my own ethnographic research into creativity.

**Focal Theory**

The systems model, briefly explained here, holds that a confluence of factors, in this case those associated with a *field*, *domain* and an *individual*, must converge in order for creativity to result.
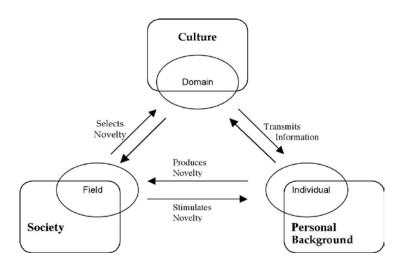


Figure 1: The Systems Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 315)

The system has circular causality meaning that the process doesn't start through the instigation of one component alone but could be instigated at any point in the system. It is then necessary for each

element in the system to play its part. The domain, or symbol system used by the field, provides the cultural terrain against which the introduction of novelty occurs. It is the field, the social organisation that understands the knowledge system, that makes decisions about whether a novel re-arrangement of the symbol system is to be included in the domain. The individual, who has a particular personal background, must acquire the domain information prior to and during their use of it, as well as be socialised into the operations of the field. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is also useful in its application to this latter aspect of the systems model and his use of the term field as an arena of social contestation was used to amplify the similar concept used by Csikszentmihalyi. The concept of field of works also augmented that of the domain as a knowledge system identifiable in its accumulated artefacts. With these constructs in mind the overall research study was designed to see whether there was any evidence within contemporary western popular music to support this model's existence.

**Ethnography as a Methodology**

The methodology used in this study has its basis in anthropology and is designed to aid in understanding complex social and cultural contexts *in situ*. According to Sarah Cohen 'ethnography increases our knowledge of the details of cultural processes and practices. Only in the light of such detailed knowledge are we justified in making more general statements about lived culture (e.g. regarding globalisation and its effects, the nature of popular music as mass culture, processes of production and consumption, etc.)' (Cohen, 1993:135) An approach like this, one that seeks to uncover the complexities of cultural practices, serves to highlight the 'complex interrelatedness of contexts, events, activities and relationships' (ibid) involved with cultural practice. It fits neatly, at the ontological and philosophical level, with the systems view of the world. At the practical level the specific methodological techniques used to examine the systems model in operation, in this case, included participant observation, in-depth interviews, artefact analysis and survey.

The participant observation was undertaken by the researcher in his capacity of musician (songwriter/performer/musical director), music journalist, his work in music retail, band management, as an audio engineer, record producer, video maker and as a teacher of songwriting in a number of tertiary institutions. This activity which was maintained across the period of the research allowed him a certain privileged access to both the domain and field of contemporary western popular music.

The in-depth interviews were conducted between 1994 and 1998 and included interviews with 71 songwriters working at the local, regional, national and international level of the contemporary western popular music industry. There were also a number of interviews conducted with various industry functionaries. These included the legal consultant to the Australian Copyright Council, a leading mastering engineer from Studio 301 in Sydney, an in-house producer for Triple J, an A&R Director for Festival Records, the Artist Director of Phonographic Performance Company of Australia, the Writer Services Manager of APRA, the President of the Australian Songwriters Association, the course coordinator of the 'Contemporary Music Program' at Southern Cross University, the Program Director of Austereo network station NXFM, the producer for Human Nature, the Creative Manager of Mushroom Music Publishing and the A&R Manager of Mushroom Music Publishing. Many of the songwriters interviewed held multiple roles within the industry.

In terms of sampling, out of the entire sample of 71 songwriters interviewed 13% were women and 87% were men. Without access to figures of all available contemporary western popular music songwriters and their gender it would be difficult to ascertain how truly representative this sample would be. Brian Ward, outgoing President of the Australian Songwriters' Association (ASA), ascertains that there would be on the whole more men writing than women. When the ASA stages live events the entrants are skewed approximately 70-30 in favour of males. However, in the recent

2002 National Song Contest run by the ASA the larger number of entries, at least 60%, were from females (i/v 2003). In addition, the primary source of in-depth interviews has been coupled with secondary interview material accessed from a variety of sources (described more fully in the literature review). As such, it can be argued that a relatively broad and representative sample of writers from the western popular music tradition were accessed. The majority of the respondents to the survey were of Euro-Australian origin possibly mirroring the preponderance of this ethnic group in the semi/professional popular music sphere (and, in turn, representing a majority of the Australian population).

The artefact analysis was conducted using various records, CDs and demo tapes affiliated with the interviews songwriters, songwriters workbooks, production budgets, touring worksheets and itineraries, email and letters, instruments used by songwriters, rehearsal rooms and studios, as wells as a number of photographs, files and records.

**Results of the Data Collection**

In terms of the results of the data collection it was ascertained that the domain (or symbol system) of songwriting includes: the formal structure, conceptual schema or set of generative conventions that organise the experience of music into song. These conceptual frameworks cannot be directly observed except as the song is used and reproduced in its production and consumption; lyric and melody which are primarily significant as they are constituent elements in all definitions and descriptions supplied and identified; all manifestations of a song identified as versions of it. These versions include all the various permutations of the song which itself consists of elements that do not essentially disturb that song's basic melody and lyric. These elements were identified from observation, interviews, the survey and artefact analysis as; simple and complex harmony, rhythmic features, accompaniment, arrangement or orchestration and, performance characteristics and production elements.

It was observed that in order to acquire a working knowledge of this symbol system the songwriters interviewed had become immersed in the domain. This enculturation occurred both informally and formally in a process that was not mutually exclusive. Domain acquisition also came about as a result of both oral and literate techniques with songwriters; having access to poetic skills seen as akin to lyric writing skills in the formal education process, having access to elementary music lessons as part of the compulsory schooling system, receiving semi-formal instruction from musicians engaged in private tuition, learning songs as part of learning an instrument, learning songs for performance, engaging in a degree of auto-didacticism through access to peer information and ad-hoc mentoring within a form of oral transmission of domain knowledge, absorbing their familial influences, and absorbing the information stored in a multiple numbers of songs through their access to popular culture transmissions. It was evident that each songwriter had become so thoroughly immersed in the domain of songwriting that it had become 'second nature' to them, so much so that they displayed and talked about a 'feel' for how to write songs.

Songwriters were also socialised into a working understanding of the field which was identified to consist of; musician's peers, members of the recording industry, those operating in the live performance arena and the various functionaries of management, marketing and promotion. It was seen that media operatives also operate as a constituent element of the field for popular music as decisions are made about; playlists on radio, video play on television, and press coverage. These decisions regulate, to an extent, the ability of songwriters to continue to operate in this creative field. Those field operatives with access to new media, i.e. websites, email, webcasts etc., provided facilities and expertise to augment many of these songwriter's ability to find alternative methods of engaging with the field for contemporary western popular music. The audience's ability to regulate the life of a recorded song also partially governs the longevity of a songwriter's activity. In this

regard, the move from conceptualising audiences as passive receivers of information to that of active participants, in not only using songs for purposes that the writers or manufacturers may not have intended but also in participating in the act of making meaning, includes audience as a vital constituent in the creative process.

In terms of looking at the individual component of the system, it was seen that the category of musician contained: performers who are not songwriters, performers who are songwriters, and songwriters who are not performers. For this study all the songwriters interviewed were performers who are songwriters. It was also seen that the occupation of musician carries with it a set of values basically peculiar to that occupation, an occupation that is primarily low status in a community sense but is also, at one and the same time, thought to be highly important. In addition the roles and norms adopted by musicians tended to predispose them to a set of behaviours that correlate with that occupation whether they were engaged as either a wage labourer, contractor, partner in a small business or acted as company directors. Importantly, the differing financial disbursements afforded songwriters meant they held a special status within the community of musicians themselves. It was observed that a musicians' ability to carry out their occupation was inflected, but not solely determined, by both biological and environmental factors that create, along with their socialisation into the field and enculturation in the domain, a set of conditions for action.

**Analysis of the Data**

It was seen that, for songwriters in the contemporary western popular music tradition, the ability to make choices and therefore be creative is both circumscribed and facilitated by their knowledge of the domain of contemporary western popular music and their access to, and knowledge of, the field that holds this knowledge. The domain, which must be accessed by the individual via combinations of formal and informal educational procedures that then, through repeated use, became 'second nature' (Bourdieu 1993, Schon 1983), or intuitive (Bastick, 1982) to them, is operative in creativity through the activity or agency of the individual's variation and transmission of this symbol system. It is the field, that is, the members of the social organisation who are familiar with the knowledge system and act as cultural intermediaries, who select and filter the variations in domain knowledge for re-inclusion in the domain. In this way cultural change is facilitated and progresses.

In taking the knowledge system and rearranging aspects of it to create novel and valued cultural products, songwriters make choices. They act as agents in this process where their essential task it is to produce some variation in the field's inherited information or domain. In producing these variations in the symbol system they make decisions and therefore choices about them. In this case they act as agents who exercise their free-will. As argued, however, free-will may not be seen in terms of absolutes. It may, instead, be a case of freedom always being relative with the limitations on autonomy, in this case, set by the field and domain acting as both a set of constraints and enabling factors making creative choice possible.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion it can be seen that the songwriters studied in this ethnographic research engaged in an activity whereby songs were generated from antecedent conditions provided by the inherited tradition or field of works of contemporary western popular music. These new works were manifest through the agency of the songwriter, whose knowledge to do so came via their domain acquisition. The resultant unique variation produced was then seen as a valued addition to the domain of contemporary western popular music by the members of the social organisation or field that the songwriters have been socialised into.

Finally, the interdependence of the domain, field and person involved in the cultural production of contemporary western popular music, as seen by the exposure and elucidation of the creative systems model in this research, allows the conclusion, at the more philosophical level, that the ideas outlined above can also be presented as an account of the interdependence of agency and structure. Rather than these two concepts being seen as mutually exclusive or irreconcilable with each other, there exists a mutual dependence that serves to make the actuality of both agency and structure possible and, in doing so, produces creative activity.

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