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The lived experience of a contemporary creative identification

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The lived experience of a contemporary creative identification

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INTRODUCTION

Recent academic writing on the creative and cultural industries has conferred a new importance on creativity and, by extension, drawn attention to the different ways in which it has been theorized. This chapter discusses the multiple meanings and associations which creativity carries for workers themselves, based on findings from recent research with current and former art college students in London, one of the cities identified as a 'creative hub' in the international upsurge of activity associated with the contemporary creative industries.

   The first section discusses the conceptions of creativity which are invoked in accounts of the sector of the cultural and creative industries. These are compared to discussions of creativity in other academic traditions, including different areas of psychology. The section briefly introduces the empirical research which the chapter will refer to. The following section outlines how creativity is conceptualized in the narrative-discursive approach adopted in the research. The third major section sets out some of the meanings around creativity which the research revealed to be in play for contemporary creative workers, and discusses the implications of these meanings for the workers' lived experience.

THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Creativity has long been a focus of interest for academics, including psychologists. Over the last two to three decades it has acquired additional importance, both inside and outside academia, because of the prominence of a supposedly new global economic sector, the cultural and creative industries (e.g. Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). These have been written about, celebrated and criticized. Their prominence has been variously linked to particular social changes and policy developments, and to the nature of contemporary economies, both national and global, although there continues to be little agreement over how to define the industries or even the extent of their novelty (see Banks, Gill and Taylor, 2013). This

section discusses some of the meanings of creativity which have been associated with the industries.

Central to these accounts is a re-envisaging of 'culture'. For example, Selwood suggests that for policy-makers culture had previously been regarded as 'a self-contained realm which exists in opposition to the material and the economic' (Ward and Pitt, 1985, cited in Selwood, 2002) to be funded, if at all, only for its own sake, as the mark of a civilized society; however, celebration of the cultural and creative industries followed partly from a new assumption that 'cultural provision is instrumental and can deliver on government objectives' (Selwood, 2007). One set of circumstances which contributed to this assumption was that artists and musicians who had moved into run-down city areas in the 1980s, including in New York and Manchester, were credited with stimulating the local economies, leading policy-makers to view these particular creative practitioners as agents of urban regeneration. Another influence was theoretical arguments that signs and ideas have become economically vital in late capitalism, both as products in themselves, such as intellectual property, and as a means of stimulating new demand through advertising and branding (e.g. Howkins, 2001).

The cultural industries are generally taken to include film, television, publishing and new media (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). In 2001, the then-UK government published a policy document which named the 'creative industries' as an even broader category (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001). They were listed as 'advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio'. The document specifically attributed the economic success of these industries to the 'individual creativity, skill and talent' of their workers. The document was highly influential and the creative industries have subsequently been promoted by national governments and policy-makers worldwide (e.g. Keane, 2009; Power, 2009).

These developments have all focussed attention on creativity as the assumed source and driver of cultural and creative production. In the words of the US academic Andrew Ross, 'Creativity is viewed as a wonderstuff for transforming workplaces into powerhouses of value, while intellectual property – the lucrative prize of creative endeavour – is increasingly regarded as the "oil of the 21st century"' (2008: p. 32). However, in the various accounts of the cultural and creative industries,

beyond the generally positive value conferred on it, 'creativity' is understood and defined in very different ways, like the industries themselves.

One obvious point of variance is whether creativity is attributed to an individual, or discussed in larger terms, for instance with reference to interactions, collaborations or society as a whole. The DCMS's mention of a wealth-making creative individual has connections to a more general celebration of creativity in relation to business and money-making. For example, 'creative' has become a buzzword linked to enterprise (see Banks 2007 for a discussion) and entrepreneurialism (see Leadbetter and Oakley, 1999), including in areas not particularly associated with either culture or the arts. In particular, creativity has been presented as an attribute of an ideal portfolio worker who moves from one project to the next in a free labour market (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009), selling the skills which industry requires and forever seeking stimulation and a fulfilment which is generally characterized as 'self-actualization'. (Sarah Brouillette, 2013) persuasively traces the origins of this image to US psychology in the post-war period. She argues that projects to specify the ideal worker for a new economic order brought together Abraham Maslow's 1943 theory of the self-actualizing worker (see Maslow, 1962) with a counter-cultural valuing of non-conformity and the rejection of social constraints. This work subsequently influenced management gurus like Tom Peters (1999), and also Richard Florida who wrote a famous early account of the new 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). As Brouillette shows, the connections are complex and sometimes not wholly coherent; however, they bring together several elements which are now part of an established, even taken-for-granted image of the creative individual as pursuing a vocation and living outside the routines, and securities, of more ordinary workers.

The psychologists in the tradition discussed by Brouillette are, of course, not the only ones who have studied creativity. Those in another area, sociocultural psychology, would challenge accounts which centre on the individual, suggesting, instead, that creative practices are necessarily collaborative. This tradition is less explicitly concerned with the cultural and creative industries although one of its best known proponents, Keith Sawyer, has directly addressed the importance of creativity for industry and the ways in which it may be promoted for commercial purposes (Sawyer, 2007).

A key figure in sociocultural psychology, Vera John-Steiner (2000) has explored how work commonly attributed to famously successful individuals in the arts and

sciences was dependent on or facilitated by partnerships or collaborations. Keith Sawyer (2003) extended the focus to a group, using improvisational theatre as both an example and model. He suggests that a successful performance is collaboratively devised. It is not reducible to the contributions of individual actors and, moreover, depends on each actor following the emerging directions of the group, rather than trying to control or lead it. In these accounts, creativity is therefore detached from the individual, becoming a quality or aspect of shared activity. Other researchers have explored how the creative activity of musicians involves engagement with other practitioners and also with established traditions of creative work (e.g. Juuti and Littleton, 2012). Sociocultural psychologists, particularly those working in the UK, have shown how 'tools' can mediate collaboration, promoting creativity, and also draw attention to 'the socioemotional, interpersonal and cultural dynamics which support and sustain [collaborative creative] activity' (Littleton and Miell, 2004, p.1), including the 'identity work' involved.

In contrast, most discussions of the cultural and creative industries by academics from sociology and cultural studies have not considered 'creativity' explicitly (Brouillette's work is distinctive) and have, unsurprisingly, also been less concerned with the individual than with social practices and contexts. The accounts tend to be critical: the sector is discussed as a site of exploitation in which young people, in particular, will tolerate insecure and low-paid employment in pursuit of an ideal represented by the figure of the creative person as an artist or 'auteur' (e.g. McRobbie, 1998; see also Gill and Pratt, 2008). For writers in this field, 'the creative' has the status of a socially constituted category which encompasses both people and activities. Angela McRobbie notes that its reference has expanded to encompass a wider range of occupations and activities (McRobbie, 2002). This fluidity is consistent with an earlier, classic sociological account by Howard S. Becker (1982), which is not specifically concerned with creativity but with a related area, the social 'art worlds' which define artists and enable their activities.

The different foci of the accounts outlined in this section are loosely linked to a further distinction. Individualist theories of psychology, including those discussed by Brouillette, appear to approach creativity as a 'real' phenomenon in the sense of a distinguishing quality, whether inherited or nurtured, which confers on its possessor an ability to innovate and to produce more or better or different outputs. Sociocultural psychological accounts go beyond the individual but again appear to assume that

creativity does exist, as a quality which can be studied and promoted. This is consistent with their broadly 'scientific' nature (e.g. Sawyer, 2012): for instance, they make universal claims, albeit based on specifically observed contexts, such as school classrooms or drama workshops, and their purpose is instrumental, to facilitate creative activities appropriate to the particular context, even though they would challenge the more conventionally scientific traditions of psychology which Brouillette discusses.

In contrast, many critical accounts of contemporary cultural and creative work (e.g. McRobbie, 1998; Gill and Pratt, 2008) consider the social efficacy and consequences of the label of 'creative' apparently without assuming any prior referent; the question of whether an activity, output or social actor is or is not creative is not usually considered. The main interest is in the social status and conditions of supposedly creative occupations, and the place of creative workers within larger economic systems. The attractions of creative work are generally implied to be illusory; for example, any affective rewards for the workers themselves are not acknowledged.

Interestingly, Becker's discussion of art worlds is more ambiguous. He discusses the fluidity of categorizations of art, and the ways in which art worlds change over time to encompass or exclude varying specializations. He refers to the 'romantic myth of the artist' (p.14) and shows how the designation of 'art' can depend on practical considerations (whether a work is easy to transport and display, for example) rather than aesthetic judgements. In these respects, his account might appear to discount any absolute definition of art or, relatedly, creativity. Yet he also refers to some 'great names', for example, when he discusses the working practices of the writer Anthony Trollope, as if these are people who are creative, unquestionably. In this subtle reinstatement of creativity as a distinctive capacity or quality, his work therefore differs from the recent writers on the cultural and creative industries.

Despite their differences, these various accounts of creativity and creative work do have some similarities. In particular, it can be argued that they centre on a similar image of the creative practitioner or maker as an elite figure who is possessed of an innate genius or unique talent and capacity (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). References to the image appear in different ways; they may be tacit or explicit, and the image may be espoused or challenged. For example, Teresa Amabile, one of the psychologists discussed by Brouillette, presents creativity as a general human capacity which can be encouraged and promoted, and is relevant to science and to leisure activities, like

chess playing; it is not the exclusive preserve of the makers of 'historically significant' products (Amabile 1983: p. 361). In these respects, her work appears to counter the associations with an elite figure. However, one way in which she studies creativity is through the examples of people who have been deemed historically significant, such as famous writers, so ultimately the image is reinforced. John-Steiner's examples of creative collaborations are taken from similarly prestigious figures in both the arts and the sciences, such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, Albert Einstein and Marcel Grossman. Sawyer also discusses activities associated with the arts, although of a more populist kind, such as jazz and theatre improvisation. Angela McRobbie's concern is explicitly with how the associations of the elite image have become attached, in her view inappropriately, to more mundane occupations, or to activities which are unlikely to provide a viable income. In this view, although the image is a false attraction, it is again attached to creative work: 'The flamboyant *auteur* relation to creative work that has long been the mark of being a writer, artist, film director or fashion designer is now being extended to (a) much wider section of a highly "individuated" workforce' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 517).

The research referred to in the remainder of this chapter directly confronted the association between creativity and the arts which is implicit in this image in that the participants were recruited through art schools or, in the British term, art colleges (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012, 2008b). The research consisted of a series of interview-based studies with novice and experienced creatives engaged in a range of specializations. Indeed at the time the research was conducted (2005–07), the prospectuses of London art colleges evidenced the 'extended' range of creative occupations which McRobbie refers to. The aims of the research were to explore the contemporary meanings of creativity and creative work, and the implications of these meanings for the participants. The next section sets out the premises of the research. The following section of the chapter presents some of the findings concerning the ways in which the multiple meanings of creativity impact on the lived experience of contemporary creative practitioners, like the participants.

<a>A NARRATIVE-DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO CREATIVITY

The previous section referred to the different ways in which creativity and the creative have been understood, tacitly or explicitly, in different academic traditions.

The research introduced at the end of the section adopts an approach (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) based in discursive and narrative psychology (Edley, 2001; Gergen, 1994; Taylor, 2010; Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Wetherell, 1998, 2003). Its premises are that creativity can be broadly construed as a process of innovation and making which is relevant to many kinds of activity and project but given a particular meaning in the socially defined contexts associated with the arts. The DCMS definition of the creative industries encompasses such contexts, which might be referred to as 'creative worlds', following Becker (1982). These are socially defined but not illusory or ephemeral. Their conventions, current problems and criteria for evaluation, grounded in histories of related activity, are perpetuated and protected institutionally, for example, by art colleges, national and commercial galleries, and the academic study of the arts and art history, and then reasserted through the ongoing practices of these worlds, including the marking out of key celebrity figures among artists, designers and collectors.

These creative worlds can be seen to be dedicated to emergent activity, as it has been defined by G.H. Mead, that is: 'The emergent when it appears is always found to follow from the past, but before it appears, it does not, by definition, follow from the past' (Mead, 1932, p. 2, cited in Sawyer, 2003, p. 12). In other words, histories and conventions, both official and unofficial, ratify novel work but cannot predict it. Creative worlds celebrate outputs as the newest developments in traditions which are waymarked by the work of famous individuals. Once achieved, the fame can function to validate further work, in a two-way or 'reciprocal' relationship noted by Becker.[1] Creative worlds are therefore a site in which value is attached to both past and future achievement. Novices seek approbation for their work which will (hopefully) produce recognition for themselves and hence validation of their further work. The research which is referred to in the chapter confirmed, however, that this is not a simple or certain trajectory. The research participants included people who had previously achieved recognition but returned to more or less the status of unknown novices (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012, Chapter 6). Alongside this future orientation and valuing of innovation, the creative worlds are also marked by strong conventions, for example, concerning the nature of creative practice, the shape of a creative life and a creative career, and the necessary conditions for the creative process to occur.

Understood in this way, creativity is a social phenomenon, in several senses. It is dependent upon and defined within the collective contexts of creative worlds. The

definition may not be made explicit but is tied to notions of the actors and activities of these worlds, as the previous section indicates. There may be multiple meanings of creativity in play, associated with different contexts and drawn on variously and sometimes inconsistently. In the terms of the narrative-discursive approach employed in the research, these meanings are resources through which workers can understand themselves or their work to be creative. The meanings shape their lived experience, as the next section discusses.

<a>MEANINGS OF CREATIVITY AND CREATIVE WORK

One set of meanings around creative work can be linked to a recognizable image which has already been discussed, that of the uniquely talented, inspired artist or other individual creative maker who is pursuing a vocation; this has been referred to as 'the romantic image of the creative artist' (McRobbie, 1998, p. 17) and also as a 'myth' (Becker, 1982, p.14). For example, participants talked of the creative process as one of total involvement or immersion (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), to be prioritized over other aspects of life. The process was also characterized as one of discovery, requiring an orientation of perpetual openness to possibility. In work practices and in life more generally, the ideal was to follow the work wherever it led, for however long that took. The conflicts with more conventionally scheduled and goal-directed working strategies are obvious.

In terms of the larger life course, the emphasis on openness and discovery could explain participants' insistence that a creative career does not follow an 'age-stage' pathway to promotion, recognition and rewards. Their talk suggested, instead, that success will come, if at all, as an unpredictable and life-transforming 'big break' (e.g. Taylor and Littleton, 2012). Another point which is consistent with the notions of immersion, openness and discovery is that creatives appeared to accept that their chosen working lives will require an indefinitely large commitment with limited reward (see Taylor and Littleton, 2008a). They also accepted as inevitable that their work conflicts with the succession of personal life stages associated with 'a dominant coupledom narrative' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005), such as courtship, partnering and becoming parents. For example, participants referred to the difficulty or impossibility of sustaining long-term relationships or supporting children. The need to prioritize the work over all else conflicts with attention to the claims of others: this is a point of

particular relevance for women because 'The prioritizing of the commitment to the individual maker's own work conflicts with an other-directedness that operates not only in conventional caring roles, such as mothering, but also more generally as part of a feminine identity' (Taylor, 2011).

However, the solitary and individual image of the creative was not the only one in play in participants' talk. Their accounts referred tacitly to an alternative, possibly more contemporary image, of the creative as working in connection with others, utilizing contacts and networks, continuously engaged in ongoing shared activities with other creatives and audiences (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). This is the kind of larger context which Becker described as an art world. In participants' accounts, it is global and also distinctly urban, in accord with suggestions that cities like London function as 'global hubs' in the cultural and creative industries.

The different images, of the solitary artist or auteur (McRobbie, 1998) and the 'connected creative' (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) indicate some of the multiplicity of meanings attached to creativity. In participants' accounts, 'the creative' is often defined through contrast, by what it is not (see Taylor, 2012). It was variously characterized as 'not academic', for example, by participants with unhappy educational histories; as not technical or scientific, a comparison made by some participants from engineering backgrounds; not ordinary, for example, in the references to the different shape of a creative career, as discussed above, and, notably, as not involving the kinds of routine, repetitive, unsatisfying work or unrewarding working life which is associated with the Fordist industries of the mid-20th century, and with the mills and manufactories of the Industrial Revolution which haunt Marxist theories of labour.

In a narrative-discursive research approach, these comparisons and claims are of interest not straightforwardly as descriptions, which may or may not be reliable, but as talk which performs certain functions for the speakers. The emphasis on difference can be seen to confirm the 'special' nature of creative work which is, again, an aspect of its association with the elite image of the individual creative. Somewhat differently, the comparisons indicate a rejection or distancing from conventional work. There are several possible reasons participants may position themselves in this way. One may be to claim the special status attached to the elite image of the artist, for themselves and also as a defence against potential criticisms from others, such as their families. The cultural and creative industries have been noted to have a highly qualified

workforce, albeit often in poorly renumerated, insecure employment: emphasizing the status and difference of their work may justify continuing in it.

More straightforwardly, this talk indicates that conventional work is negatively valued. The accounts can be seen as part of a larger feature of the participants' talk, namely, the avoidance of such work. To suggest this is not to accuse the participants of laziness: the research projects confirmed what other academics have noted, that creative workers commit long hours and great effort to their chosen specializations (Gill, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; McRobbie, 1998). Their willingness to overwork has been attributed in part to the personalized nature of creative work and creative making. Writers in different traditions have linked creative work to self-actualization (as Brouillette noted) and the making of the self (John-Steiner, 2000; McRobbie, 1998); most, however, have discussed personalization as having an ultimate focus on the work itself, for example, as a reason for workers' 'self-exploitation'. An alternative argument, based on the research discussed here, is that for some creative workers the personal project takes over as the ultimate focus.

Taylor and Littleton (2012) suggest that such a re-shaping of a creative ambition and career has two related aspects. One, already noted, is a turning away from the 'outside' world of workplaces and careers. Participants' talk suggested different motivations for this, including difficult study experiences which made them unconfident about their reading and writing skills (many embraced an identification as dyslexic) and difficult previous workplace experience as part of other, non-creative careers. The second aspect is a focus on making and, particularly, repairing the self and what can be characterized as a 'deficit' identity. Some of the deficits related to a label for difficulties already mentioned, like educational 'failure'; others to personal experiences of exclusion or lost opportunities which are less easily generalized, or to larger social positionings around class and gender; the distinctions between any or all of these are, of course, not easily unravelled. Their relevance is that they may put in question the status of the individual as the creative actor and maker; if creative work is (understood to be) personal, then an (understood) inadequacy or deficiency of the person as worker or maker puts in question the quality of the work. Taylor and Littleton (2012) suggest that a deficit positioning can therefore become linked to a re-interpretation of the creative project. Rather than being open and directed towards the 'yet-to-come' (Adkins, 2008: p.196) it is turned inwards and backwards to become a somewhat different project of remedying the self. Of course the personalized nature of

creative work means that it is often closely identified with the creative maker and her biography, but the distinction which is suggested is that this self-making or actualizing comes to dominate.

There are several reasons to suggest that the turning away from work entailed in this re-versioning of the creative project is a gendered phenomenon. One is that gender difference can itself be linked to a relative valuing in which women are positioned as the second, deficit identity (de Beauvoir, 1952/1988, cited in Weatherall, 2002, p.12). Two other points are particularly relevant to the contemporary cultural and creative industries. One is that in the broadly white collar workplaces associated with the industries, women will inevitably predominate in lower status, non-creative secretarial and administrative roles; it will therefore be a struggle for aspiring women creatives to escape being relegated to similar categories. A further point particularly relevant to creative workers is the well-established distinction between a professional and a domestic version of related creative activities, with the former being the province of men and the latter, lesser version assumed to be carried out by women, as part of a domestic role. So chefs cook professionally, and women cook at home; couturiers produce high fashion and women do home dressmaking; professionals design interiors and women are responsible for the general appearance of domestic environments. For women who aspire to become creative professionals, there is always therefore an extra possibility of a deficit positioning, as 'just' the feminized domestic version.

In summary, Taylor and Littleton (2012) argue that the experience of contemporary creative workers will be shaped by the confluence of established meanings around, on the one hand, creativity as the defining quality and possession of an individual maker or worker, and, on the other hand, deficit positionings, many of them gendered, which challenge a potential claim to such a quality and therefore to a successful creative identity. They suggest that in consequence some aspiring and novice creatives turn away from the contexts of workplace and industries which politicians and others have grouped as the contemporary cultural and creative industries. This turning away entails a re-interpretation of the personal creative project in which the aspects of self-making and self-actualization pre-dominate and the primary project becomes one of repairing the supposedly deficient self.

This interpretation is consistent with certain statistics about contemporary creative work, and about the art colleges which function as training grounds for many aspiring

workers. For example, it has repeatedly been noted that women are under-represented in the workforce of the cultural and creative industries, as also are people from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (e.g. Gill and Pratt, 2008; CCS, 2011) who can also be seen to be positioned in deficit terms. Women, however, have been noted to be a majority on certain art college courses (Pollard, Connor and Hunt, 2008), suggesting that they may be attracted to creative careers but discouraged from pursuing them.

<a>CONCLUSION

This chapter has approached creativity in terms of the meanings attached to it and the implications which these meanings have for people who claim or aspire to be creative. The arguments which have been presented are based on research with people engaged in or preparing for creative occupations and careers, defined as such by their double connection to art colleges, conventionally the training institutions for the arts, design and related activities, and to the contemporary sector of the cultural and creative industries. The meanings of creativity which impact on the research participants' experience derive in part from academic sources and are then recruited to policy and training purposes; the different contexts of creativity are not distinct. However, for the research participants and other creative workers, the multiple meanings overlap and sometime conflict, their aggregated implications producing new and seemingly self-evident logics attached to creativity as part of work and life practices.

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[1] More fully, 'Works and makers stand in reciprocal relation to one another. How do we know artist have special gifts? By their works, which produce special emotional experiences and reveal their exceptional skills.' (p. 356) [but] 'we also know works by their makers, whose abilities give works a warrant which they would not otherwise have' (Becker, 1982, p. 357).