

Creative Genius as Inherently Relevant and Beneficial: The View from Mount Olympus

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ABSTRACT

The author responds to Kaufman's (2018) target essay from a unique perspective – research on creative genius. Although the author began studying little-c creativity, he switched to Big-C creativity when he did his doctoral dissertation, and continued that work for the rest of his career. One implication of such research is that the relevance of creative genius cannot be questioned, even if its benefits are sometimes ambiguous (however obviously consequential). Another implication is that creative geniuses do not require training in creativity, whatever usefulness such instruction may possess for everyday creativity.

James Kaufman (2018) raises some critical issues with which I have some sympathy. After all, I have made a long-term commitment to creativity research under the assumption that it was and remains a significant topic. Indeed, I started conducting my own original inquiries into creativity in the late 1960s while still an undergraduate (e.g., Simonton, 1980, published a decade later). Thus that initial interest was sparked about a half century ago! Moreover, I continued that fascination in graduate school despite being warned by various well-intentioned advisors that it was a dead topic that no longer attracted leading-edge research (Simonton, 2002). In fact, the thesis I submitted for my 1973 masters degree was entitled “Creativity, Task Complexity, and Intuitive versus Analytical Problem Solving” (Simonton, 1975b), while my 1974 doctoral dissertation featured the main title “The Social Psychology of Creativity” (Simonton, 1974). Sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion, the dissertation contained three empirical chapters, each of which was converted into a journal article (viz. Simonton, 1975a, 1975c, 1975d). All of

those published articles contained “creativity” in their main titles. My status as a bona fide creativity researcher was established with a bang.

Even so, a striking paradigmatic shift occurred between my masters thesis and my dissertation, despite their proximity in time. The first was a fairly typical laboratory experiment using a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design, where the first two independent variables involved experimental manipulations (task complexity and instructional set) and the remainder entailed splitting the participants into high versus low creatives using a median split, where creativity was assessed using an established instrument. All of the participants were anonymous college undergraduates - a mere 40 of them or 5 “per cell” - and the data were run through a standard analysis of variance. Nothing shocking here. The only surprise was a provocative three-way interaction effect without any lower-order interactions or main effects.

The doctoral thesis, in contrast, focused on a “sample” of approximately 5,000 of the most eminent creators in Western civilization. Rather than confined to the early part of the 1970s, these creators were active between the ancient Greeks and the 19th century. Furthermore, the “participants” made historic contributions to all of the major domains in the arts and sciences, from mathematics to music. Moreover, these creative geniuses were not treated as individuals but rather were aggregated into 127 20-year periods, thereby yielding generational time series that could be subjected to econometric-style dynamic analyses (Simonton, 1984). Even more dramatically, the independent variables could not contrast more. Rather than easily manipulated task complexity and instructional set, the dissertation examined the predictive value of role-model availability, political instability, political fragmentation, imperial instability, war, civil instability, and cultural persecution - all sociocultural context variables, needless to say. In short, where the masters thesis studied what has been called “little-c” creativity, the dissertation definitely examined “Big-C” creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Simonton, 2013). Unlike the former, where the creative participants merely managed to score above the median on an instrument that purports to assess creativity, the latter subjects count as genuine creative geniuses who have made wide and enduring contributions to world civilization. Like Michelangelo or Isaac Newton. If they’re not creative, nobody is!

It should be obvious now that from the standpoint of these Big-C creative geniuses, “relevance” is not at issue, no, not at all. Steve Jobs was a recent exemplar, and can anyone imagine what *their* everyday personal life would be like today without his creative ideas? Want to give up your smart phone? Take away all of the contributions of creative geniuses to our current culture, not much more than barbarism remains. Indeed, modern

civilization represents the culmination of Big-C creativity. This fact is often unappreciated because most people live in a human-created environment that they simply take for granted. Yet to get back to the basics prior to creative genius would essentially require emptying both home and office, and then razing both home and office to the ground - plus stripping off most of our clothes! At that point, the only recourse remaining is to assume the lifestyle of someone living in Neolithic times, if not earlier.

Admittedly, the contributions of creative genius are not necessarily beneficial, or at least not if a critic adopts a contrarian attitude. Several undoubted Big-C creators were engaged in the Manhattan Project that produced the world's first atomic bomb. The list includes such Nobel laureates as Hans Bethe, James Chadwick, Arthur Compton, Enrico Fermi, Richard Feynman, and Ernest Lawrence – plus Albert Einstein was directly involved in persuading President Roosevelt of the need to launch such a project in the first place. Given the original motive to get the bomb before Nazi Germany managed to do so, that endeavor certainly seemed commendable at the time. Yet in hindsight, the world today might be a far better place had such weapons never existed. Nevertheless, this argument is hard to pursue because of the difficulty in evaluating overall costs and benefits across time and space. Even the seemingly harmless arts can become means to evil ends, such as the way that Richard Wagner's operas were coopted to reinforce Nazi racist ideology.

One final observation apropos of Kaufman's (2018) essay: To the best of my knowledge, none of the Big-C creators who populate history had any explicit training in how to be creative. They certainly didn't attend workshops in creative problem solving or read self-help books on how to find their inner genius. To be sure, many were mentored by notable predecessors, but this mentoring largely entailed training in the requisite domain-specific skills and knowledge. In addition, not only is it the case that many great creators never worked under such distinguished predecessors - Einstein himself was a prime example - but it's also true that only a tiny minority of those mentored by the greats become greats themselves. The latter fact suggests that the elite few who emerged as creative geniuses brought their own exceptional talents into the mentoring relationships. A key component of those gifts is a conspicuous openness to experience that has a strong genetic basis, as Kaufman noted. This is not to say that Big-C creativity is born, not made, but only that the "making" part does not require generic instruction in how to be creative. Once the necessary expertise is acquired, young talents can just let their insatiable curiosity lead the way.

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