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Brief Communications

Creativity and Psychodynamics

Charles Brenner, M.D. 

In his great dictionary, Johnson defined the word *create* as *to form out of nothing*, *to cause to exist*. His spiritual descendants, the lexicographers who put together the latest edition of Webster's dictionary, likewise defined *create* as *to bring into existence*. Insofar as popular works of literature and dictionary definitions accurately reflect accepted usage, one may say that the words *create* and, by extension, *creativity*, are loaded words. They impute truly magical powers to those who do the creating: the power of making something out of nothing, the power of bringing into existence, as God is supposed to have done according to the opening of the book of Genesis.

In addition, the adjective *creative* implies a significant value judgment. It is complimentary. Shakespeare was creative. So were Newton and Einstein, da Vinci and Michelangelo. One would not ordinarily call Genghis Khan, Hitler, or Stalin creative, even though each was instrumental in bringing into existence an organization that profoundly affected the lives of millions. To call someone creative is to imply admiration and approval, not the reverse.

Few people and even fewer scientists today believe that something material can be created out of nothing. What do seem to appear from nowhere, what do seem to be literally brought into existence, are thoughts and ideas. They and the objects to which they give rise—literature, art, scientific theories—are what deserve the adjective *creative*.

Freud's first approach to the problem of creativity was his monograph on Jensen's *Gradiva* (Freud 1907). In it he wrote that a writer of fiction

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... directs his attention to the unconscious in his own mind, he listens to its possible developments and lends them artistic expression instead of suppressing them by conscious criticism. Thus he experiences from himself what we [psychoanalysts] learn from others—the laws which the activities of [the] unconscious must obey. [p. 92]

In the later article on Leonardo da Vinci (Freud 1910), Freud's conclusion is quite evident that unconscious, repressed wishes can influence normal thought and behavior, but, and the but is a big one, only or primarily in creative individuals, in artists and especially in great artists. In fact, the belief still persists that the greater the artist, the freer that artist's access to the normally hidden sexual and aggressive wishes of childhood and to the conflicts associated with them. When such wishes influence the thought and behavior of ordinary folk, as in the slips and errors of daily life, Freud considered them pathological—the psychopathology of everyday life.

The idea that creative artists have special access to wishes and conflicts of childhood origin that are inaccessible to uncreative individuals unless those uncreative ones are neurotic (return of the repressed from repression) poses a serious problem. One way to solve the problem is to postulate that one must be more or less neurotic, or even psychotic, to be creative. Since everyone, creative or not, has plenty of evidence of neurotic difficulties, it is not hard to adduce evidence that seems to support this thesis. One need only demonstrate evidences of neurotic compromise formation in creative individuals, which is not difficult to do. Unfortunately, however, one must at the same time assume that ordinary persons who are not creative have little or nothing in the way of neurosis troubling them, which is far from the truth.

Another solution to the problem is to equate creativity with neurosis and/or psychosis. Being creative is then viewed as the equivalent in an artist of a pathological compromise formation in someone who has neither talent nor capacity for artistic creativity. The creative act is thus viewed as an alternative to succumbing to mental illness, an idea that artists themselves not infrequently put forward.

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Kris (1952) suggested still another possible solution, which he called *regression in the service of the ego*. His idea was that creative activity takes place in an altered ego state, one in which the creative individual has temporarily regressed to an earlier, less mature mode of mental functioning. The analogy would be to the sort of regression that Freud (1900) showed to be characteristic of mental functioning during dreaming. Just as a dreamer has access to the wishes and conflicts of childhood that are normally inaccessible during waking life, so a creative individual, Kris suggested, has equal or similar access to those wishes and conflicts during an act of creation.

I suggest that a better explanation than any of the ones just summarized is offered by recognition of the fact that conflict and compromise formation are ubiquitous in mental life (Brenner 1982). The part played in creativity by the conflicts originating in childhood sexual and aggressive wishes is no different from the part they play in every other aspect of mental life. Creativity is no different from everyday mental functioning with respect to its dynamics; what is special about creativity does not have to do with its psychodynamics. To put the matter more positively, everyone is creative all the time, every day. Every thought, plan, and action is a creative compromise formation, dynamically speaking, however mundane and ordinary it may be. Everyone, whether awake or asleep, produces a constant

stream of compromise formations, each of which is a unique creation without being in the least creative in the accepted meaning of the word.

Creativity is not a word to be used lightly. It is an accolade. It is not to be bestowed on universal, everyday mental activity. Implicit in the concept of creativity is a value judgment, one adopted from the culture of society. What it signifies in our society is not just novelty of thought or action, or even thought and action that are unique as well as novel. It signifies in addition that the mental functioning of the person called creative is judged by the members of the society in which she or he lives to be *successfully* innovative. It signifies that the compromise formation(s) called creative are admirable and useful ones, ones that other members of society wish they could do, too.

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To underline the point that the current, shared opinion about creativity is culturally based, it may be recalled that not all societies at all times thought highly of innovations, successful or not. There was a time in western European history when the ideal was to conform, to do one's duty to God and master, and to shun change and innovation. When Galileo proposed his innovative idea about the solar system, an idea that is today considered to be highly creative, his masters in the church judged him to be heretical, not creative, and would have put him to death had he not recanted. The same sort of variability in judgment is apparent in the field of art. At the time when Van Gogh was unknown and disregarded as an artist, a painter named Bouguereau was widely acclaimed as a creative genius. Fifty years later, none but a very few had ever heard of Bouguereau, while Van Gogh was a name on everyone's lips. What is deemed creative today may be looked on as banal tomorrow. What is unnoticed or despised today may inspire universal admiration and praise after the death of its creator.

In brief, creativity, like beauty, lies in the eyes and mind of the beholder, not in the psychodynamics of the individual who is called creative, however justified the appellation may be. It is the value judgment of one's fellow creatures that decides whether one is to be called creative or not. If one leaves that judgment to one side, everyone deserves to be called creative at every moment. As far as mental life is concerned, both men and women are creative by nature. Those who are honored by being *called* creative are the special few whose creative products are admired and prized, the special few whose creations are judged to be successfully innovative by the members of the society to which they belong. The dynamics of the creative process are just as present in the creation of a piece of pulp fiction as in the creation of *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*. What distinguish products that are rated as trash from those that are considered "truly creative" are their formal characteristics, not their dynamics. And the formal characteristics are, in large part at least, determined by societal norms. If there are any formal criteria of creativity (as we use the

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word)—or, for that matter, of beauty—that are absolute in the sense of being independent of societal norms, they have yet to be convincingly demonstrated.

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