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The Creativity of Women

John E. Gedo, M.D.

Creativity refers to major, original accomplishments in difficult endeavors and cannot be correlated to any specific personality attributes. Assessments of creative success involve social judgements; in most societies, activities open to women have not been highly valued. Until recently, only very exceptional women have been able to transcend the obstacles to success in fields not reserved for their sex. Whenever such impediments are removed, women have equaled the creativity of men.

In current social conditions, public success may depend on aggressive behavior of a kind many women will not engage in, often on moral grounds. Others are likely to sacrifice self-interest out of altruism, particularly in behalf of members of their family. Pregnancy and lactation often decrease a woman's commitment to other activities, partly on a hormonal basis. Guilt about having too little time or energy for children may be expiated through self-sabotage at work, and a husband who resents a woman's creative success will frequently sabotage her as well. In such competitive situations, women tend to be more inhibited than men, probably as a result of childhood indoctrination.

At the same time, women seem to have a greater commitment to and more capacity for "self-creation" and the creation of humane communities.

Discussions of creativity are often muddled by a failure to define the term. The word may be used adjectivally, to characterize a person; on the other hand, it can refer to the successful outcome of some difficult endeavor that involves a measure of novelty. In the first sense, an individual is said to be creative as a result of a specific constellation of the personality; in the second, the attribution of creativity is a social judgment, extrinsic to personal attributes and almost entirely dependent on the shared values of a specific culture. Some commentators reserve the designation for accomplishments in the realms of high culture; others use it for novel solutions in any kind of important enterprise—some of us have even proposed (see **Gedo, 1983** Epilogue) to acknowledge the "creativity

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of everyday life," that is, finding novel solutions for the various challenges of routine existence.

There is no doubt whatever about the historical fact that most societies, including those of the industrial world, have assigned high value to masculine activities and low ones to those traditionally pursued by women. Hence, for the most part, women have achieved public success only by entering fields beyond the roles their society has made generally accessible to them. In these endeavors they often encountered severe obstacles; perhaps the domain in which these could best be managed was that of religion, where there have always existed certain institutional structures reserved for women—to be sure, in the Western world, such careers could only be followed by sacrificing family life for their sake, and success generally depended on some measure of education actually available to relatively few. Despite all that, exceptional individuals did with some regularity overcome all obstacles to produce dazzling spiritual accomplishments. Probably the most dramatic achievement of that kind was that of Joan of Arc, whose intervention was decisive in liberating her country from foreign rule, but Saint Catherine of Siena, who healed the schism in the Church by bringing the Papacy from Avignon back to Rome, accomplished just as much.

Neither sainthood nor the restoration of the commonwealth can be expected to occur with any frequency, especially not in the ranks of women committed to family life. In patriarchal societies, women therefore eventually became most likely to reach public success in certain artistic endeavors, particularly in literary pursuits, because these can be carried out privately, on a seemingly nonprofessional basis. Obviously such activities were for a long time confined to the upper strata of society, but by the eighteenth century, in much of the Western world, bourgeois women could become successful authors or painters. The Enlightenment brought with it the progressive breakdown of the barriers that had deprived most women of the educational opportunities necessary to prepare to tackle difficult intellectual endeavors, and the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual integration of women into most of the domains of art and science—from Jane Austen and George Sand through Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, to Florence Nightingale and Marie Curie. In our lifetime women have proved themselves to be just as suited to the activities honored by society as are their fathers and brothers.

Why, then, are questions still asked about women and creativity? Is it because fewer women than men choose careers in certain prestigious fields? Because many continue to be less career oriented than success requires? Because others do not

choose to battle the residual obstacles in their way but seek satisfaction in the creativity of everyday life, instead? I suspect that such statistical considerations do play a role in casting doubt on the "creativity" of women, if that is defined in terms of public success. I believe, however, that the conception of creativity as a discrete function of personality, a purely speculative notion, is

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a factor of even greater importance in raising such doubts. Now that it is no longer respectable to denigrate women for lacking a penis (or a conscience), it has become necessary to accuse them of having a lack of that mysterious characteristic, "creativity." (In psychoanalytic terms, this idea formerly took the form of asserting that creativity is a function through which people compensate themselves for the inability to bear children. According to this notion, most women are consequently only good for producing babies.) The illegitimate transformation of the predictable outcome of social conditions into a fictive biological predisposition—that of creativity as one psychic function—continues to produce confusion about the true potentials of women.

At the same time, it is fatuous to deny that the difference between the sexes goes far beyond the reproductive system, for we now know that the very organization of the brain is sexually dimorphic—an effect produced by the action of endogenous testosterone. The plasticity of the developing central nervous system is so great, however, that various types of organization can yield essentially similar results in terms of functional capacities. In other words, there is no reason to believe that any particular outcome of the development of the brain is more advantageous for creative success than any other. (See **Schore, 1994**. See also **Levin [1990]** who reports studies from japan that show the differential effects on brain organization of acquiring different mother tongues. These differences between the brains of japanese-speakers and member of other ethnic groups are not correlated with any distinctions in the realm of "creativity.")

The biological differences between the sexes exert their effects on their respective achievements not because their central nervous systems are differently organized, but in more indirect ways. Probably the clearest illustration of such an effect (and the one that may well have the strongest impact on the choices men and women make that contribute to success in difficult endeavors) concerns the correlation between levels of testosterone production and aggressivity. Few would deny that, as a group, males tend to be more aggressive than females—a rule common to all mammalian species (It has long been understood that castration leads to docility in all domestic animals.) In many societies aggressivity, in turn, is often one of the essential components of the kind of behavior necessary to achieve success in "creative" endeavors.

Let me underscore the point, however, that the capacity to behave aggressively is the result of a number of factors, including various characteristics of the personality, so that in individual instances testosterone levels are not necessarily decisive in that regard. Similarly there are countless ways of skinning a cat, so that creative success does not always depend on bullishness. Nonetheless I believe that, as a group, women are much less likely to override the wishes and needs of their associates than are men, so that they are more likely to sacrifice opportunities for creative accomplishment. I can offer several examples of that kind from my psychoanalytic practice—from instances in which a girl's ambitions

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and self-assertion suffered inhibition because they aroused the hostility of parents or siblings, through others wherein they stimulated excessive guilt because chilhood vicissitudes had convinced the person of her magical destructive power, to those in which they were ever outweighed by other considerations, such as a need to use aggression only in the service of others. (I have provided detailed case reports about all these contingencies in **Gedo, 1983** and **1996a**). In my clinical experience, boys are less likely to become inhibited on the basis of such conflicting psychological pressures than are girls, and *this* relative imperviousness to the influence of the milieu may well be attributable to hormonal factors. (Conversely, it is also possible that the greater tendency of women for altruistic self-sacrifice may be hormonally determined.)

Perhaps the most impressive example of the inhibition of aggressivity to interfere with a woman's creative success I can cite is that of a person whom I have followed for about 40 years. She was initially referred to me after a maximally serious suicide attempt that followed a bitter disappointment in a lover who turned out to be merely sexually exploitive. (It was no coincidence that my patient had been sexually abused as a child without being able to elicit a protective response from her mother.) Treatment soon brought to light her intense anger at all those who had exploited and disappointed her, rage that had been turned against herself, largely because her morality precluded any exercise of "selfishness." It took several years of psychotherapy to modify these mental dispositions so that she could tolerate being angry with others without having to punish herself. She then longed to engage in some challenging enterprise, but she was married to a man who needed a great deal of support, they had young children, and she did not feel justified about pursuing her own interests at their expense.

After a hiatus the patien returned for a second course of therapy because her family life did not satisfy her; she was

depressed because she felt that she was not making full use of her abilities. She wanted professional qualifications equivalent to those of her husband—it was clear to her that her potentials were at least as promising as were his. (In my judgment, she was still underestimating herself; she seemed to me to be one of the most intelligent persons I had ever encountered.) Ultimately, however, she sacrificed an opportunity for professional training for the sake of promoting her husband's career and the upbringing of her children who had severe developmental problems. This decision repeated one she had made in adolescence, to focus her energies on fighting to obtain an education for her younger brother, who subsequently became a respected scientist. *That* sacrifice forced her to attend schools where she could not prepare for any intellectual occupation. A generation later her self-restriction again had some role in ensuring that her own children could become highly successful.

The second period of psychotherapy was terminated when the patient found an acceptable compromise between altruism and self-assertion; With her children properly launched in school, she returned to work in the paraprofessional

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occupation for which she had been trained. She did so in the context of a business enterprise started in conjunction with her husband and, in vital respects, guided by her acumen. (This entrepreneurial initiative eventually made them wealthy and provided the patient's spouse with an adequate career until his ultimate retirement.) The patient also became active in the national organization of the practitioners of her occupation, and she was gradually gaining prestige and influence in that domain.

Several years later, now past the age of 40, this woman consulted me again with a recurrence of serious depression. Her life had not changed significantly, and it was precisely this stasis that appeared to have made her consider suicide once again. On this occasion I recommended attempting a full-scale psychoanalysis—I was by then bolder, more experienced, and confident in the broader therapeutic scope of psychoanalysis. The analytic effort was largely successful in overcoming the patient's propensity to yield to the intrusive, parasitic demands of her associates—initially her mother and her father—to live a symbiotic existence with them. One result of this change was freedom on the part of the patient to push her husband to sell their business, so that they could both "retire." This turned out to be a lengthy process (for a great deal of money was involved, and the patient proved to be quite patient!), but when it was completed, this woman was able to obtain graduate training in an esoteric discipline that for her had always constituted a private passion—in her milieu, deemed too "impractical" (and hence "selfish") for her to have considered it as a career.

Of course, in late middle age she could no longer count on making a significant "creative" contribution in such a field (which requires a long apprenticeship to achieve real mastery)—but her ability to pursue it at all indicated that the creativity of everyday life that had distinguished everything she had undertaken would, in all likelihood, not have deserted her if she had been free to invest her efforts in an enterprise she really loved. At any rate this dramatic history illustrates the devastating effect on creativity of the inhibition of appropriate aggressiveness; in this specific case, all three of the sources of conflict about this adaptive requirement I listed above were operating concurrently.

Instead of spelling out other confugurations of inhibited aggressiveness more likely to occur in women than in men, let us consider some of the unavoidable consequences of parenthood on creative activities. Although these are in large part determined by social expectations, the effects of pregnancy (especially multiple pregnancies), lactation, and the mother's share of the responsibilities of "primary caretaker" should not be underestimated. While they are engaged in these absorbing endeavors, many women tend to experience a loss of ambition in other respects. No doubt, this is the inevitable result of identification with a "good enough" mother and acceptance of the age-old social role of woman-as-nurturer. Yet, once again, we cannot discount the strong influence of hormonal levels that constitute the biological bedrock of the human behaviors to safeguard

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the newborn—dispositions to take care of offspring lacking any biological (as opposed to ideological) impetus in males. In other words, although it is not an inability to bear children that compels men into compensatory creative endeavors, the biology of motherhood does propel many women into devoting a considerable segment of their lives into "creativity" only pertinent within the family. Obviously such a commitment makes creative success in other fields considerably less likely. It is all very well to provide a "mommy track" for women unwilling to make a choice between their competing goals, but there is no way to compensate for the loss of experience and momentum attendant on such a compromise situation.

In psychoanalytic practice I have never encountered a woman who failed to experience some guilt about giving equal weight to her professional ambitions and her family responsibilities, and such reactions tended to be more severe whenever private ambitions were actually given priority. Of course, in itself, a guilt reaction need not interfere with performance, but

most people have a poor tolerance for chronic guilt feelings and tend to engage in acts of expiation—as the followers of the British analyst, Melanie Klein put it, to make reparation. In several female patients who felt guilty toward their children (sometimes without being fully aware of this), expiation took the form of arranging to derive no pleasure of profit from the professional activities that competed with those of childcare.

The clearest instance of this kind I have witnessed was one in which a husband, envious of his wife's professional promise, encouraged the children to complain that they were neglected. I am not in a position to judge whether these complaints were justified; when I performed the analysis, the children were adolescents and my patient was a professional failure. One of the favorable outcomes of treatment was the analysand's ability to forgive herself for past decisions that led to unhappy results—decisions based on the obligatory repetition of certain transactions of early childhood. Subsequently this person was able to produce scientific work that earned her a considerable reputation (in a highly specialized field, to be sure). Once again a person liberated to do creative work only in middle age could not achieve what she might have done if she had been able to permit herself to be successful earlier—but the case illustrates the fact that a woman's careerism at the expense of children can produce devastating self-restrictions. I have never seen anything of this kind in the case of a man.

Some of the illustrative vignettes I have already presented demonstrate that the attitude of her spouse codetermines a woman's reactions to pursuing a career. In my clinical experience, whenever a patient's husband opposed her creative ambitions, he either succeeded in wrecking the marriage or in blighting his wife's career—sometimes he achieved both. In this regard, however, I have observed no real difference on the creativity of men and women: wives can almost as easily sabotage their husbands' ambitions as men can those of their spouses.

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However, I believe women may be more likely to inibit their competitiveness when it is aroused by their husbands than are men when they are in competition with their wives—an effect that probably goes beyond any sexual difference in levels of aggressiveness. Although social mores are probably implicated in this pattern, I suspect that it is not the mores of adult life but those applied to children in the oedipal period that are responsible for this difference. At least in my clinical experience, families have been much less tolerant about the tendencies of little girls to try to outdo their fathers (which is often seen in terms of penis envy) than in those of boys to compete with their mothers (often approved as a harbinger of masculinity). In other words, persistence of the so-called negative Oedipus complex in boys may yield an acceptable character trait if it acquires a veneer of "masculine protest." In both sexes phallicity may later become equated in fantasy with "creative" endeavors; If such a conflict is revived in marriage, women seem to be more vulnerable to unconsciouscastration fears than are men. (This often leads to defensive hysteroid behaviors that never promote a woman's creativity either.)

As I have previously put this issue,

> In [one] group of women who have needed analytic assistance to realize their creative potentials, the father responded to the child's promise by feeling personally threatened by its implications. In the most flagrant cases, this reaction resulted in a campaign of persecution—belittlement, riducule, false accusations of hostility, and worse. In one instance, this type of response was motivated by the fact that the father's own creative ambitions, generated by ... considerable talents, had never been realized. In another, the father became violently jealous because his own father, who had never paid much attention to him, was openly captivated by his granddaughter's sparkling intellect. Perhaps the most common source of these mirror images of a negative oedipal constellation is a pathological reaction on the part of the child's mother, who arouses her husband's jealous hatred by abandoning him emotionally in favor of a symbiotic relationship with this particular daughter, probably chosen because the mother wishes to share her future promise. A particularly insidious form of the destructive paternal response is one in which its hostile nature is masked by a surface...of flirtatiousness or other seductive behavior, pushing the child away from her intellectual interests [**Gedo, 1983**, pp. 63-64].

If, up to this point, I have devoted this essay to various ways in which their personality traits might handicap women in achieving certain goals, I should redress the balance by giving equal emphasis to psychological characteristics that give them *advantages* in that regard. This is a subject too broad for adequate treatment here, but I may be able to deal with that aspect which specifically pertains to creativity. I must preface this discussion by restating my belief (see **Gedo, 1996b**) that work—even creative work—is neither a sacred duty nor the

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prerequisite of mental health Freud allegedly suggested it is. I do not mean that human beings can be well adapted without choosing certain goals to commit to a vocation—only that this vocation need not have any social utility. Elsewhere (**Gedo,**

1983, Epiloque) I have made this point by stating that the creativity of everyday life is good enough for a good life. Another way to put it is that self-creation is perhaps more important than any other kind of "creative" endeavor.

I believe the greatest advantage of women with regard to creativity is their greater interest in and broader capacity for self-creation. (The most mundane way to document this is the evidence of their greater willingness to avail themselves of psychoanalysis) One way to explain this sexual difference is to recall the greater talent of women as a group for emotional self-cognition and expressiveness (witness their particular suitability as therapists!); another is to refer to the more varied distribution of specific functions in their cerebral hemispheres (as shown by the better recovery of women after cerebral injuries). If the biology of women predisposes them to preside over home and hearth, it also gives them advantages in the creation of truly human (that is, humane) communitities through introspection and empathy.

In my judgment (see **Gedo, 1996a**, chap.2), people engage in those creative endeavors that give them the greatest satisfaction through the pleasure of exercising their strongest talents. It is therefore scarcely surprising that a significant proportion of women (even in a benighted age that idealizes work for its own sake) still prefers *not* to "work," if that option is economically feasible. I suspect that such a choice is unacceptable to most men, and not only because of social pressures: Few men are content with a life of self-creation, because relatively few are very good at it. It is true that self-creation has its own pathologies (for instance, imposture, anorexia, or polysurgical addiction), but there is nothing wrong with subscribing to the "feminine mystique" (if such a commitment is not driven by anxiety). The current fashion for physical fitness scarcely gives men comparable opportunities for success or gratification. How many achievements can surpass that of one of my former analysands who, in the course of a decade of (on and off) treatment, transformed herself from a lumpy adolescent into a woman of fashion and a noted beauty?

I trust that the manner in which I have addressed the subject shows that I see no value in postulating a human capacity for "creativity"; hence I do not think that talking in terms of "creativity in women"—or homosexuals, or Orientals, or Southern Baptists—is actually a meaningful way of formulating the issues. All human beings engage in activities that many others may look upon as creative, but the capacities and psychological dispositions that determine success (or failure) in these endeavors are infinitely heterogeneous. Men and women differ in their biology, even in the organization of their central nervous system, and they are subject to different social constraints, but none of these differences leads to any personality organization that either precludes or guarantees any particular

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achievement. Both men and women, however, have to live with the consequences of the choices they have previously made in life—options that may have decisive effects on what they can later accomplish. Life is more complexly organized than we like to believe.

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