

Creative Britain

Stephanie Taylor looks at how social psychology explains the phenomenon

In Britain, and in a new global creative economy, creative people are now valued as economic actors and potential agents of prosperity. Social psychology offers insights into their experience and what makes them creative. It can also help to explain why there are more creative workers now, when they are in demand.

Social psychologists argue that creative behaviour is the outcome of people's circumstances, interactions, collaborations and group relationships. Even what counts as a creative output will be socially defined. Of course, this social emphasis is at odds with the classic image of an inspired creative individual, such as a designer or artist working alone in the studio.

questions

How is it possible to increase the supply of creative people to meet a new demand for creative workers?

If the image of an inspired creative individual (like a genius artist or big name designer) is only a 'myth', does it still carry any importance for contemporary creative workers?

resources

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Britain is creative, officially. In 2010 Britain had 106,700 creative enterprises, which contributed £59 billion to the national economy, according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2011). Another 50,000 creative jobs will become available by 2016, if a current British Council project meets its targets (British Council, 2013). The 2012 London Olympics were claimed as a triumph not only for Team GB's athletes but also for the creative workers who produced the spectacular opening and closing ceremonies – including designers, film-makers, choreographers, stage managers and costume-makers – as well as the many others involved in the development, promotion and successful presentation of the games.

All of these workers are part of Britain's creative economy. They belong to a sector, generally referred to as the cultural and creative industries, which has been celebrated for the last two decades as a growth area and generator of new jobs, in Britain and globally. There has been considerable academic interest in the rise of the sector, the reasons why creativity has become economically important and what exactly it means to be a creative worker in the 21st century. This article will look at some of the contributions of psychologists to these discussions. It will review the

work of social psychologists who have studied creativity from some very different starting points and theoretical positions, to draw out some of the insights that their work provides into the phenomenon of 'creative Britain' and the experience of contemporary creative workers.

The value of creative people

The rise of the creative sector in the late 20th and earliest 21st century in the UK, the USA and globally has been investigated by economists, sociologists and other academics. They have noted the ever-increasing need to invent new products in order to stimulate continuing demand from affluent consumers, and the greater significance of branding, marketing and advertising. The expansion of tourist markets is tied to the branding of places, including whole countries, and has also conferred a new importance on museums and 'heritage' attractions. In addition, the expanding knowledge and digital economies depend on innovation and design. In short, it has been argued,



2012 Olympics – a triumph for Britain's creative workers

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all of these areas of economic activity require continuous inputs from an imaginative creative workforce.

Academics have noted a further set of circumstances in the late 20th century that contributed to the rise of the sector. In a number of major Western cities, artists moved into run-down urban areas, seeking cheap studio space, for instance, in former industrial buildings. It was subsequently noticed, including by politicians and developers, that the presence of the artists tended to attract other people into the area, perhaps initially for entertainment and nightlife. The area would gradually become fashionable, then more affluent as other people settled, including middle-class residents. The artists had therefore, unintentionally, initiated gentrification and redevelopment. These urban success stories focused further attention on artists or creative people as economic actors and potential agents of prosperity.

It has been suggested that the new value of creative people was partly anticipated by psychologists in the USA in the middle of the 20th century. According

to Sarah Brouillette (2013), they undertook the task of specifying the type of worker required for future economic development and prosperity. Anticipating that industry would need innovators, they took as their model for the ideal future worker a Romantic image of the artist as a uniquely talented individual pursuing inspiration and a creative vocation. The image itself has been described as a 'myth' (Becker, 1982) and probably derives from the biographical accounts of 19th-century



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European painters, which were devised by art dealers in order to encourage sales. However, the image is well established and widely recognised and, Brouillette argues, influenced the psychologists' depictions of the ideal new worker. This would be a creative non-conformist who defies social norms in search of fulfilment or self-actualisation and is able to live with uncertainty and 'float for a time in a purposeless void without a distinct future' (p.38). Although this is obviously not an account of a conventional good colleague or organisation person, it does describe a worker who can manage a freelance or portfolio career, moving from project to project in a new, flexible labour market, selling creative skills to whichever employers require them. Brouillette suggests that it became a new ideal in management theory, for instance in the work of 'gurus' like Tom Peters.

Individual talent?

Taken together, these various developments and influences can be seen to have conferred a new value on creativity. In one resonant description, it came to be seen as 'the oil of the 21st century' (Ross, 2008). The source of prosperity, to be tapped like an oil well, was supposedly the individual creative worker, as the imaginative source for new products and brands, the genius behind web developments, the producer of intellectual property and branding, and the driver of urban generation, among many other roles. In 2001 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport listed the creative industries 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' and attributed their collective success to the 'individual creativity, skill and talent' of their workers (DCMS, 2001; emphasis added).

Yet the work of social psychologists, in the USA and in Britain, challenges this

focus on individual creativity. One of the most widely cited is Teresa Amabile, who is among the US psychologists referred to by Brouillette. Amabile (1983) studied observable behaviour, wanting to avoid 'conceptual' definitions of creativity. She proposed that creative behaviour is the outcome of favourable circumstances. The factors that produce or promote creative behaviours go beyond the individual and include education. Moreover, her 'operational' definition of creative behaviour is that it produces outputs or products that 'appropriate observers' agree are creative. These observers are informed and influential people in the relevant field, be it science or arts or a more specific activity like chess playing. Amabile therefore links creative behaviour to the social context that recognises and defines it as 'creative', and promotes it.

Sociocultural psychologists extend the social emphasis further, proposing that creative behaviour itself is not individual but relational or collective: creative outputs are inevitably produced through interaction and collaboration. For example, one influential writer in this field, Vera John-Steiner (2000), presented studies of the working practices of 'famous names' in the fields of literature and science, as well as art, to show that the success attributed to a named individual was actually dependent on a creative collaboration such as a partnership.

Another US sociocultural psychologist, W. Keith Sawyer (2003), observed actors in improvisational theatre as a model for creative behaviour. There is no script or advance rehearsal and no one person is in charge of the performance. It unfolds 'live' and unplanned, in front of the audience, as the actors respond to each other and to the developing situation and storyline. Sawyer observed that the success of the improvisation depends on each actor working as part of the group rather than attempting to follow an individual plan. The creative output, the performance, is not reducible to the contributions of individuals but comes from the group as a whole. It is an example of collaborative

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creativity. Sawyer is particularly interested in the business and commercial applications of such creative collaborations and has researched examples of the successful use of creative groups in commercial companies in order to develop new products (Sawyer, 2007).

In Britain, other sociocultural psychologists, including Karen Littleton and Dorothy Miell (2004), have explored creative collaborations in the context of the classroom, looking at children working together in groups. The approach has opened further avenues for investigation and application, such as the ways in which the collaborative creative processes can be enhanced and outputs improved through the use of 'tools', ranging through pen and paper to newer technologies such as electronic whiteboards.

In a different tradition, social psychologists have recently developed a model of creativity based on social identity and self-categorisation theories. Alex Haslam and colleagues (2013) argue that the relationship between the individual and the (potential) ingroup is central to creativity and creative processes. The group becomes an audience for its members' work and also provides a set of norms, such as the principles of an art movement like surrealism. The individual is motivated to produce creative work that advances the group's interests, by following and extending the valued norms of the group. These may be distinct from wider social norms and indeed are likely to challenge them, since art is seldom conventional.

Despite its different theoretical underpinning, the work of Haslam et al. resembles Amabile's in that it draws attention to the ways in which creativity is recognised and defined socially, and therefore variably. What counts as 'creative' can change, for example from one society or historic period to another. There are parallels here with the definitions of art offered by an influential US sociologist, Howard S. Becker (1982) and, more recently, the 2013 Reith Lecturer, the British potter, Grayson Perry (2013). Becker and Perry both propose that the differences between 'art', as either process or output, and 'craft', or 'not art', or just ordinary work, are not absolute but are established over time by the various people, including audiences, who make up what Becker calls an 'art world'. In short, art, like other creative work, is not produced in a vacuum but depends on

other people, for the process of its making and also for its recognition and definition.

Towards a creative Britain

What are the larger implications of these various social psychology studies of creativity? What can they contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of creative Britain? The first point is that the social psychological studies challenge the conventional association of creativity with individual genius or special talents. Instead, a premise of their different research approaches is that the capacity to create and innovate is widely shared, if not universal, and utilised in many life and work activities. Moreover, by proposing that creative behaviour is the outcome of people's circumstances, as in Amabile's model, or their interactions, collaborations and group relationships, the various studies suggest that it can be fostered: people can be made more creative, for example through education and through encouragement for the collaborations and groups that might stimulate creative outputs.

Extending these ideas, we might surmise that this fostering will be particularly likely to take place at a time when creativity is highly valued, for its (assumed) economic efficacy. All of these points can to help explain why creativity and creative work have become more prominent in Britain. In addition, if creativity is socially defined, it seems likely that the same economic context will promote its

recognition. For example, activities might be labelled as 'creative' that had previously been given more mundane labels. Studies of Britain's creative sector have noted this expansion of the reference of creativity. It is no longer limited to the traditional 'elite' activities of say, painting, sculpture, classical music, but now encompasses many new activities, as the 2001 list of creative industries indicates.

These are not the only psychological studies that can contribute to our understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of Creative Britain. In a series of projects conducted from 2005 to 2008, Karen Littleton and I employed an approach based in narrative psychology and critical discursive psychology to research the experience of contemporary creative workers in Britain (Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Littleton, 2012). Our interest was in their interpretations of themselves, their work and their life possibilities. A premise

of our narrative-discursive approach is that people are always positioned within the constraints or limited possibilities of established social and personal interpretations. The approach assumes a fluid, incomplete process of identification in which people draw on the knowledge and values made available by their interknit personal and professional contexts, ongoing and previous, in order to make claims about who they are, and who they want to become (Taylor, 2006). Established ideas and images, like the Romantic image of the artist, have implications for this identity work, including for the life narratives people can plausibly construct for themselves.

Our research began in art colleges, mostly in London as Britain's main 'hub' city within the global creative economy. There have been claims that Britain's creative economy in large part originated in and depends upon its art college system (McRobbie, 2012), and the 2001 list indicates how closely the creative industries are tied to the arts. Our research participants worked in a huge variety of specialisms, many, like digital design, photography and fashion, beyond the traditional elite activities of fine art. Although the participants entered creative careers through their study in art colleges, they were at different career points. They ranged from current students to people who were many decades beyond their degree studies.

Analysing their accounts of themselves and their lives, we found that our participants invoked two different images of the creative worker. One was a person connected into a contemporary creative world, utilising contacts and networks, continuously engaged in ongoing communications with other creatives and with audiences to stay in touch with the (urban and global) field and its latest developments. In its emphasis on connection and working with others, this image echoed sociocultural theories of collaborative creativity.

The second image, unsurprisingly given the art college context in which the participants were recruited and the larger art college connections of the sector noted above, was the Romantic one of the individual artist or creative maker. What was perhaps less predictable was the extent to which this image shaped the participants' accounts of their work and careers. For example, they talked of the creative process as one of discovery, requiring an orientation of perpetual openness to possibility. In their accounts, creative work requires total involvement or immersion, to be prioritised over other aspects of life. They characterise their

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work as an open-ended and even playful experiment, or a quest to be followed for an unforeseeable time, rather than an activity amenable to goal-setting and time management. Similarly, they emphasise that a creative career does not have a predictable forward narrative to promotion, recognition and rewards, like an 'age-stage' pathway. Their assumption, instead, is that success will come, if at all, as an unpredictable and life-transforming 'big break'.

The participants acknowledged that such ideals of creative practice are difficult to achieve. It was consistent with the Romantic image that they appeared to accept that their chosen working lives would require an indefinite large commitment with limited reward. They also accepted an inevitable conflict with the succession of personal life stages associated with 'a dominant coupledom narrative' (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005), such as courtship, partnering and becoming parents. Many of them talked about the difficulty or even impossibility of sustaining long-term relationships or supporting children.

However, despite these difficulties, they presented their work in highly positive terms. In particular, they emphasised its difference from old or 'ordinary' work, which they tended to characterise in terms of routine and mindless drudge, like a caricature of a factory production line. They rhetorically distanced themselves from 'ordinary' jobs, being 'trapped' in the nine to five, from lives which follow a predictable trajectory and from 'having to' retire at 60 or 65. They described their work in highly personalised terms, as matched to their

interests, the unique product of their personal identities and experience, and a source of fulfilment and self-actualisation. They repeatedly referred to their 'love' of their work and suggested that in this they also differed from ordinary workers.

On one level, these positive accounts are surprising. The creative sector has been widely criticised for the predominance of precarious employment (short-term, project-based) and low pay, and also for its inequalities (e.g. women and black and other minority ethnic workers are underrepresented in almost all the creative industries). How, then, should we interpret the participants' accounts in the face of these difficulties? Are their positive claims to be taken at face value, or are these workers deluded, conniving in their own exploitation by accepting poor employment conditions?

In a discursive approach, it is important to consider the functions of people's talk, and part of our research was to consider our participants' accounts in these terms. It is relevant here that for a number of decades (roughly equivalent to the period of the rise of the creative sector), sociologists have noted negative trends in work and employment generally. It has been suggested that workers in all fields experience less security and less control over their work. Employment is more likely to be short-term. Fewer people can look forward to a job for life or even a predictable career trajectory. In these circumstances, Creative Britain and our research participants' accounts of their creative work and working lives acquire a new significance. In apparent defiance of the negative general trends, the creative

workers assert the specialness of their work and their own centrality to the work process. With its emphasis on personalisation, the Romantic image of the creative maker apparently encourages them to unite their lives and their work, even in the face of employment uncertainties. They reconcile themselves to precarious employment and future uncertainty by reclaiming career continuity through their personal commitment to their work, often dating it right back to a childhood interest. Their accounts construct, retrospectively, a narrative of personal development and destiny, presenting their careers as vocations rather than coolly rational choices. The personal biography becomes evidence of a vocation and therefore validates the career choice, however conventionally unsuccessful it may be in terms of providing secure or lucrative employment. In short, these accounts cannot solve the problems of contemporary work more generally but can be seen to function to re-interpret and remedy some of its difficulties and conflicts in ways which make sense of the workers' own lives.

The phenomenon of Creative Britain continues, beyond the Olympics and in spite of the global financial crisis. In a climate in which creativity is seen to be economically important, more jobs and workers will be defined and recognised as creative, and creativity is likely to be fostered. Social psychological studies indicate how it can be facilitated by the kinds of contacts and collaborations that are more available in urban contexts. A narrative-discursive analysis of creative workers' own interpretations suggests the influence of the Romantic image of an individual creative maker who endures hardships for the love of the work and the hope of eventual fulfilment or self-actualisation. A creative occupation is not always the best work, or even good work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), but creativity can bring new satisfactions even to difficult circumstances. This finding is especially significant because creative work has been claimed as a model or exemplar for the future of work more generally. The experience of creative workers may offer insights into how more and more people in Britain will be able to manage their lives and their careers.



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