

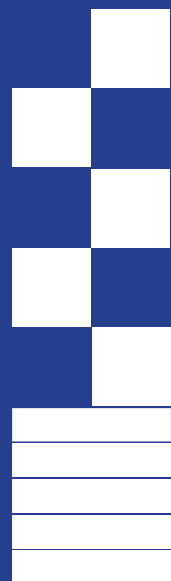
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Creativity: Process and Personality

Larry Gross

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preface by
Larry Gross



Larry Gross

CREATIVITY

Process and Personality

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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Preface to the mediastudies.press edition

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NEARLY SIXTY YEARS AGO, in the summer of 1963, I embarked on an ambitious project that would comprise my senior honors thesis in psychology at Brandeis University. I had entered Brandeis as a psychology major, drawn there by the presence of Abraham Maslow, whose work I had encountered in my father's library. As it turned out, Abe Maslow ended up being my adviser and mentor, until his untimely death at the age of 62, in 1970.

My primary interests as an undergraduate were psychology and art history, although I was also able to take advantage of the remarkable faculty then assembled at Brandeis across a wide range of fields. The psychology department, which Maslow had built and chaired for many years, was unusual for the period in not adhering to the then-dominant behaviorist school and I was exposed to theories of child development, personality, and perception, as well as the still controversial area of cognitive psychology.

Although it's tempting to merely direct readers unfamiliar with mid-twentieth century psychology to Wikipedia, I will note here one of the defining features of the behaviorist approach, initiated by John B. Watson and most influentially developed by B. F. Skinner. This approach insisted that the only elements that can appropriately be included in a scientific theory of human behavior are those that can be directly observed and measured. Anything else that might seem relevant to explaining human behavior, but that cannot be observed, such as thoughts or emotions, are excluded from psychological science, however welcome they might be in poetry, literature, and everyday conversation.

Abe Maslow's preferred approach, which he called Humanistic Psychology, diverged from both the behaviorist school that dominated academic psychology and the psychoanalytic approaches, Freudian and others, that dominated clinical psychology. Maslow's view of psychology was heavily influenced by Gestalt psychology, which postulated models of cognition, as well as cultural anthropology, which readily accommodated thought and emotion.

Behaviorist studies focused on basic processes of learning in animals and humans, which were seen as the direct result of the ways that actions by individual organisms (rats, pigeons, humans) were reinforced—rewarded or punished—by forces (social, physical, etc.) in their immediate environment. All learning and thus all human behavior, it was forcibly asserted, was determined by the same basic patterns of stimulus, response, reward, and punishment that could be observed in the behavior of rats or pigeons.

Psychoanalytic theories and methods concentrated on the diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional problems—with the challenge of repairing damage. In contrast to these approaches, Maslow emphasized the understanding of psychological health and creativity, and emphasized that a better understand-

ing of human nature and possibility would arise from close study of creative, healthy individuals rather than from the more familiar practice of generalizing from the treatment of neurotic and even psychopathic patients. Maslow's (1954) first major book, *Motivation and Personality*, laid out the theory of a hierarchy of motives that shaped human behavior, and the possibility of "self-actualization" as the attainment possible for the happiest few.

It was typical of Maslow's approach to the field that he recruited Ulric (Dick) Neisser as a junior faculty member in the psychology department. One of my favorite teachers, Neisser was then developing the work that resulted in his important 1967 book, *Cognitive Psychology*. While it's probably difficult for readers today to appreciate that this title was itself a dramatic provocation at the time, the book represented an important move in the revolution that eventually overthrew the behaviorist hegemony that dominated psychology from the 1940s through the 1960s. Neisser's work in cognitive psychology drew in significant part from his early engagement with computers and computer simulations of human cognition, notably his collaboration with Oliver Selfridge at MIT in the 1950s.

When I began thinking about possible topics for an honors thesis, it seemed entirely appropriate to focus on the area of creativity, which was squarely within the domain of Maslow's work, but which also had deep connections with my other primary interest, in the arts and the role of the arts in shaping and reflecting culture. This also allowed me to draw on my extensive studies in art history, as well as anthropology and sociology.

Most of the studies of creativity that I was familiar with in psychology aimed at identifying and even measuring the mysterious trait—"creativity"—that somehow characterized those rare folks who made significant contributions to the arts. Some of these approaches were more democratic, in that they postulated a general trait of creativity that might manifest itself in almost any domain. Asking folks to come up with a list of things that could be done with bricks, for example, among other similar questions, would yield a cumulative score that would differentiate the more creative from the less imaginative and thus identify those possessing the "creativity trait." Somehow, this didn't seem to me to capture much of what I was interested in when I thought about the nature of creativity.

The direction I decided to take was influenced by Maslow's work, in which he derived an understanding of self-actualization by observing and talking to individuals, some of them his own mentors, such as Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer, whom he saw as representative of this rare tribe. I thought it would be optimal for me to embark on case studies of the creative processes as they were represented by a group of undeniably creative folks. It also seemed that if these folks were psychologists, and their creative endeavors constituted psychological research and theorizing, I would be better able to follow and understand their accounts than in the case, say, of mathematicians, physicists, or even painters or poets.¹

Abe Maslow liked the idea and encouraged me to undertake an unusually ambitious project of deep-dive case studies of a diverse group of psychologists. With Abe's support I received an "Undergraduate Research Grant" from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), through a program that was then new and I'm sure has been over for decades. The grant, which provided \$300—nearly \$2700 in today's terms—was sufficient for me to purchase a Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder that I used to record the interviews that are the basis of this work. This was a very new product—a portable (which is not the same things as light-weight) machine that could record on 30-minute reels, and that I could then use, laboriously, to transcribe the resulting interviews.

Recruiting an impressive set of willing research subjects turned out to be easier than I had any right to expect. Two of my subjects, Herbert Simon and Milton Rokeach, were known to my father, Bertram Gross, himself an academic by this point. He knew Simon from the fields of organizational and management theories, and Rokeach had occupied the office next door to his at the Center for the Advanced Studies in

the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto in 1961–1962. In addition to agreeing to be an interview subject himself, Abe drew on the nearby Harvard faculty and connected me with Jerome Bruner, David McClelland, and B. F. Skinner, all of whom agreed to participate.

Looking back over the thesis I see that I launched the project during the spring semester of my junior year, interviewing Herbert Simon in his office at what was then the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh in April 1963. The interview with Simon, which lasted many hours, although only about four of them were taped, was then the basis on which I refined my interview protocol for the subsequent interviews, which lasted typically from three to four hours (except in the case of Skinner, which is explained in the text).

Once the interviews were complete, and transcribed—a laborious process for a two-finger typist, but one that allowed me to become thoroughly familiar with the material—I wrote the thesis during the spring semester of my senior year. I then departed for New York City and Columbia University, where I began graduate studies in the relatively new, and small, department of social psychology that had been created as a separate unit in order to escape the behaviorist orthodoxy that dominated Columbia’s psychology department at that time.

My father brought the thesis to the attention of his editor at the Free Press, a storied publisher that had published the work of Weber, Parsons, Katz and Lazarsfeld, Merton, Goffman, and Becker, among others.² The editor was interested in the work—a tribute to the stellar cast of psychologists interviewed—and told me that he’d like to pursue the possibility of publishing it as a book. Quite a moment for a 21-year-old first-year graduate student. However, there was a problem. I had not originally considered the possibility that the thesis would result in such a publication and had not discussed this possibility with my interviewees; they most likely had not considered this, either, when they agreed to speak with a curious undergraduate.

I wrote to the interviewees and informed them of the interest expressed by the Free Press editor. Two of them were quite clear in refusing my request for permission to publish their interviews. Milton Rokeach replied that he had been much more candid in the interview than he would be willing to be in print—which was entirely fair. Skinner told me, quite reasonably, I thought, that he was planning to write his own memoirs and wished to reserve his recollections for his own writing. Subsequently, he published three volumes of autobiography. Abe Maslow was willing to have the interview published, with the exception of a few sentences about his mother. Bruner, McClelland, and Simon had no objections to publication, but without Rokeach and, in particular, Skinner—the “biggest name” at the time—the book idea evaporated.

In any case, I was fully occupied in other ways. I found myself in a new institution, in a new field—I had no previous exposure to social psychology and can clearly recall my consternation as classes began and I encountered names and theories that were entirely unfamiliar. In this new context the thesis and the topics it represented were far from my current focus, and I put the thesis away and largely forgot about it. Over the intervening decades I would occasionally show parts of it to interested colleagues or students, or recount the still somewhat surprising story of an unusually ambitious undergraduate thesis.

So, why am I taking this 60-year-old manuscript out and making it available to a possibly interested readership?³ I am now older than all of my interviewees were when I interviewed them—they seemed so much older to me then!—and I have lived longer than Abe Maslow, who died at the ridiculous age of 62, and Milton Rokeach, who died at an also ridiculous 69. I am well aware that many of these scholars will be only faintly familiar to readers today, even though they were notable and eminent figures when I interviewed them. Curiously, B. F. Skinner, who was, as I’ve noted, arguably the most influential psychologist at the time, is now largely forgotten, while Abe Maslow, who was then seen by many mainstream psychologists as a fringe figure, is among the best known twentieth century psychologists. Herbert Simon

is still renowned, given his lasting influence on decision theory and his 1978 Nobel Prize in economics. I believe it is fair to say that David McClelland and Milton Rokeach are less known to today's academics, and even Jerry Bruner, who died in 2016 at the age of 100 (!), is receding from view. This is, of course, the fate of most scholars, and says nothing invidious about these particular individuals. In the long run we are all dead, and most of us will be forgotten.

Reading through this work, it seems to have been written by someone else. I recall writing it, but the words and sentences are unfamiliar. However, I am also pleased and even impressed by the clarity and cogency of the writing, and relieved to see that it is interesting and engaging and even informative. This is, clearly, a testament to the interviewees and their generosity in speaking to me and being as candid as they were. It is also a reflection of the value of such interviews—oral histories, if you like—as a means to illuminate interesting and important aspects of the creative life.

Is there a theme that is common to these disparate scholars and their reflections—keeping in mind that they were all in the middle, not at the end of their creative careers? I think the closest summary I can find is that they emphasize the role of curiosity—pursuing hunches and allowing ideas to chart their own course—and serendipity—recognizing the value of the unexpected and being willing to change direction. They all note the degree to which they can retrospectively appreciate the unfolding of an underlying trajectory whose destination was not clear at the time. As I write this, in my 80th year, I am reminded above all of Kierkegaard's insight, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward."

NOTES

1. I should note here that I was already thinking about symbolic processing—influenced by Hadamard's (1949) brilliant *An Essay on the Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field*—along the lines that I (Gross, 1973) later articulated as "[m]odes of communication and the acquisition of symbolic competence."
2. The Free Press had just been purchased by Macmillan and moved from its home in Glencoe, Illinois, to Manhattan.
3. I have chosen not to change anything in the thesis, besides correcting a few typos, and resisted the temptation to improve on my earlier self's writing or thinking. That would be impertinent and, quite possibly, unsuccessful.

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