

A “Life Story” Theory of Creativity: How Childhood and Midlife Experiences May Link in Our Eudaimonic Journey

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Abstract

This paper explores how childhood experience, both positive or negative, might become “seeds” or earliest sources of subsequent creative activity in adult life. This is based on analysis of Ph.D. research data (Worth, 2000) and a case study in progress on the life of C. S. Lewis. The paper indicates contributions from influential adults and mentors during development as the sources of changes to personal and creative development. The dynamics observed within individual development reflected Wong’s (2012a) “PURE” and “ABCDE” model, and Wong and Worth’s (2017) paper on the Deep and Wide Hypothesis.

Introduction

This paper is a summary of a presentation given at the International Meaning Conference in Vancouver in August 2018. The intention was to look at an aspect of the “life story” of creativity over time, to propose a connection between specific childhood experiences and how these may subsequently become reflected in adult life experiences and in particular at the midlife period. This connects to the core theme of the Meaning Conference in identifying and proposing an appropriate trust in the eudaimonic unfolding that the author proposes is a core reflection of existential positive psychology. The life journey, and the practise of creativity, is a reflection of how we become more of who we truly are, and in turn Wong’s (2012b) writing and focus on the human search for meaning.

The focus of the talk proposed and explored how signs or origins of “creativity” may appear within an individual’s life in childhood, and potentially become a “seed”, a representation of a cognitive and emotional experience that reappears and develops over time. While creativity is the focus of a huge body of literature in its own right, the first author proposes that its expression and practise also represent how we as individuals show more fully who we truly are (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Worth, 2000). Described in this way, we propose that “creativity” is also an expression of eudaimonia.

In the spirit within psychology as a discipline of sharing ideas and work in progress, these ideas were communicated to prompt discussion and seek feedback.

Background

Worth’s (2000) Ph.D. research involved taking a lifespan perspective on the appearance, growth, and development of creativity over the lifespan of a population of 40 individuals with a reputation for “creativity” at the time of the study in their localised context. His ambition and wish had always been to look at these “over time” elements of creativity in case studies of exceptionally creative individuals. At the time of the conference, he had work-in-progress studying the life of C. S. Lewis.

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Table 1. Ph.D. summary.

- Ph.D. research (developmental psychology).
- Biographic interviews with 40 individuals (45-60 years old) with a reputation for creativity in their context. (Male – 24; Female – 16).
- 5k pages of interview analysis. 120k word thesis.
- Analytical method: thematic analysis.
- Patterns read across 40 lives—and more.
- Validation: Feedback to interviewees. Presentations at conferences.

It is important at this point to clarify definitions of terms that might be used.

Table 2. Definitions of talent, expertise, and creativity.

	Precision/clarity in the use of language?
Talent	Innate capability within the person?
Expertise	The ability to perform a skill consistently and well? Procedural application of skill?
Creativity	The ability to develop the “new”, “novel”, and useful within their context?
Eudaimonia	Could we assume that any of these are ways in which we show the “best in us”, search for personal meaning, and become more fully who we are?

A key point the first author proposed in using this data is these terms, talent, expertise, or creativity may be behavioural indicators of individuals living to the best in themselves, and as such reflecting the eudaimonic journey within our lifespan.

Patterns of early experience and development observed in Worth’s research included those characterised in literature on exceptionally creative individuals (Ochse, 1990), albeit this was a sample of “normal” individuals.²

Table 3. Developmental patterns in early life experiences of exceptionally creative individuals.

- First-born or only children.
- Early signs of later creativity (*Literal. Specific skill.*)
- Parental support.
- Home environment.
- Schooling and teachers.
- Influential adults.
- Bereavement/illness.

Literature on the creative person proposed the likely developmental trajectory as that of a specific “skill” or talent recognised in childhood (e.g., Bloom, 1985), supported/developed from

² It was striking to note at the time of Worth’s research that psychology as a discipline saw normal, gifted, and exceptionally creative individuals as three separate groups, with different developmental patterns. Worth’s (2000) literature review established that the three bodies of developmental literature appear to mirror each other.

that time which in turn became exceptional performance. Worth's (2000) sample included this experience, and in addition, skill/talent evident in childhood but not "recognised" or supported at that time, and subsequently identified in adulthood. These two "trajectories" might be considered as the "normal" pattern and are ones that in previous conference presentations appear readily recognised.

However, Worth's current work on a case study pointed towards a third possible path. This was described as an experience of deep absorption and/or joy that was not overtly a skill or talent (yet could subsequently be interpreted as symbolic of one).³ The experiences from these individuals appeared initially to become "latent", unexplored, or unconscious, and become "remembered" subsequently; however, the processes occurring were re-examined later.

Motivated and prompted by his work and experience as a teacher of positive psychology and psychotherapist, Worth recognised the number of people he encountered who appeared still searching for meaning and purpose. He believed that the first two developmental trajectories of creativity might be more "obvious" to the general population, but perhaps the third, that of intense sensory and imaginative experiences in childhood, could hold a key as a question or prompt to support individuals rediscovering what mattered to them and was an absorbed or sensory reflection of their motivation, love, and/or care.

To explore this, he re-analysed his Ph.D. data to determine which of his participants might fall within this category. He determined that 4 out of 40 had their midlife creativity mirrored in an experience of "joy" in childhood. In his research interviews, he believed that few recognised the link between the experiences at the two ages. He saw the stories of these individuals indicating they were deeply absorbed in an activity, where the sense of time was lost. This appeared to be the very early qualities of flow, though not all characteristics. Primary within these appeared to be sensory absorption. He interpreted the childhood experience as one that becomes mirrored eventually in an "adult" version or skill.

In addition to the deeply absorbed sensory states, this sample also included those who had experienced trauma or bereavement. While this is recognised in the literature on exceptional creative individuals (Eisenstadt, 1978), Worth's sample portrayed creative skill as a coping mechanism or a way of finding a sense of safety in uncertain situations and the characteristics of the "Deep and Wide" hypothesis in creativity proposed by Wong (2012a) and Wong and Worth (2017). Worth interpreted this as a reflection of the development of the inter- and intra-personal multiple intelligences proposed by Gardner (1999).

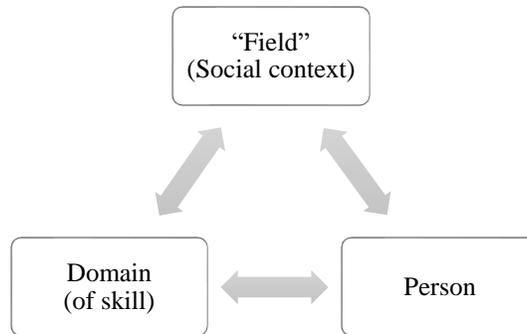
Again, motivated by encounters with other individuals (students or therapy clients) who appeared to be seeking or still finding their way, Worth speculated that the deep sensory absorption became a form of memory that returned or was remembered at a later time. May (1994) appears to support the manner in which absorption can alter our motivation and direction. While this is an optimistic, fascinating, hopeful, and even compelling interpretation of early experiences, was this a "seed" that produced outcomes of its own? Worth persisted in his re-examination of his data.

In an effort to explain these events Worth was drawn to what he believed is a re-interpretation of Csikszentmihalyi's systems theory of creativity (e.g., 1999). This theory proposed that "creativity" exists and occurs within a system, not in an individual or product.

³ An example from Worth's Ph.D. research sample was a man who described the sense of "loss of time" characterised by definitions of "flow" when playing with his toy train set as a young child, and also colouring pictures. He spoke of imaginative journeys he would undertake. The creative activity he had developed in his midlife period was making travel videos of journeys to motivate and encourage others.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the question is “where is creativity”? This is portrayed in a three-part model:

Figure 1. Worth’s systems theory of creativity.



Systems Theory of Creativity

Definitions

Person: The site of the acquisition and transformation of knowledge that has the possibility of changing “domains” and “institutions” (Feldman, 1994, p. 16).

Domain: The structure and organisation of a body of knowledge and skill on a topic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Field or Social Context: The social and cultural “organisation” that allows, supports or obstructs the development of work, skill, and possibility. The field is seen as the place which mediates or influences access to a domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1999; Feldman, 1994).

The participants in Worth’s study offered recurring examples of what he described as “influential adults” who had altered or changed the direction of these individuals in their creative expression or work. The types and behaviours of individuals included:

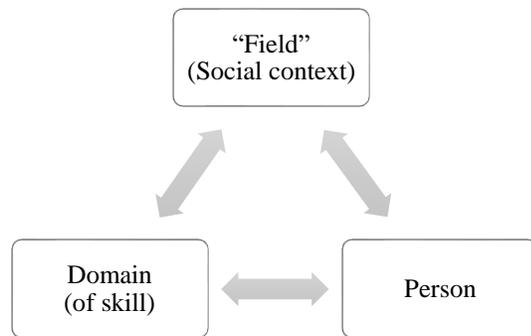
Table 4. Types or categories of influential adults.

Role Models	Demonstrate work skills and practices aspired to by the other person.
Mentors	Offer recognition to another; give a work opportunity; prompt a new understanding of their capability.
Teachers	Teach a new skill; challenge or change a way of thinking.
Authors	Writers who have influenced via books, etc.

Note: An underlying pattern of recognition and support from others. There will be a “genealogy” and/or “genetic” chain of influence from one person to the other.

This argued that individuals were influenced over time by someone more experienced in their interest or context that shifted or changed their understanding in the ways described in Table 4. This would suggest that the “systems” model does more than Csikszentmihalyi (1999)

proposes in the social context judging or accepting creative output. In earlier stages and times, the social context acts in support of a developing interest, skill, and working practises via the behaviours or actions described above from the “influential adult” altering the “person” and the “domain”. Further, that if viewed this way, then the systems model represents a cycle of effect over time. Worth proposes in this paper that it has the qualities of a spiral (see below) where each part of the system may be visited and revisited by external influences over developmental time. He further infers that this systemic effect may shape the presence and development of the “Meaning Mindset” proposed by Wong (2012c), which here is a passion and energy for creativity and its contribution both to the creator and the context in which it occurs.



Changes to Creativity in the Mid-Life Period

Within Worth’s (2000) sample, changes to creativity in the midlife saw a proportion of individuals re-connecting with a “love” or skill that had not been developed or expressed in earlier life. There was the clear inference in the research data that they found an expression of creativity, and greater meaning, within their lives (Wong, 2012). Alternatively, within the broader sample, it was evident that there were changes in the content or processes of pre-existing creativity. This involved new “domains” or processes of working that were positive expressive and developmental changes. Additionally, participants appeared to find a freedom of thinking or working emerging from increasing age, such as worrying less about what others thought. “Success” was not as important. Individuals were willing to take risks they would not have taken when younger. Further, they were seeking “meaning” or answers to “big” questions about remaining life (Cohen-Shalev, 1986, 1989).

Illustration from a Case Study: The Life of C. S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was an Oxford (and then Cambridge) University Fellow and Professor who was one of the most influential writers in the 20th century. His creative output included academic work on English literature, theological writing on Christianity, and children’s stories.

In exploring his autobiography (1955) and biographies (Downing, 2002, 2005; Duriez, 2003, 2013; Wilson, 1990/2005) it is evident:

From three years upwards:

- He experienced profound absorption, “joy”, in the following experiences.
 - A “toy garden” created by his older brother and brought to their nursery.

- Beatrix Potter’s “Squirrel Nutkin” stories.
- Poetry, specifically “Tegner’s Drapa”, The Northern Sky.
- Views of the countryside from their house, e.g., Belfast Lough and the Antrim Mountains.
- Lewis wrote (1955, p. 18) “The central story of my life is about nothing else” than this experience of joy.
- Lewis’ mother died when he was aged 10.
- He was sent, with his older brother, within two weeks of his mother’s death to a physically abusive boarding school in which very little teaching occurred.
- Lewis gradually moved to atheism in his teens.

How do these relate in what Downing (2005) described as an “idyllic childhood to a traumatic boyhood” to his mid-life experiences?

- Lewis experienced conversion from atheist to theist (in 1929) and then to Christianity (in 1931). He became a “lay theologian”, widely respected and influential as a public speaker and as a writer on Christian subjects.
- He was the author of the *Narnia Chronicles*—children’s books, involving the adventures of young children in a world populated by animals with personality.

Yet while Lewis’ shift in personal perspective, belief in theism and Christianity, and creative work is sometimes portrayed in biographies as relatively sudden, his autobiography describes seemingly “coincidental” steps and occurrences. These included making new friends who held diametrically opposite views to his own, and the reading of books that also drew upon views very different and challenging to his own. These experiences brought about shifts in his perceptions and views, a development of his own creativity and sense of meaning (Wong, 2012).

Conclusions

The exploration of research data from Worth (2000) and Downing (2002, 2005), Duriez (2003, 2013), Lewis (1955), and Wilson (1990) suggests that “seeds” of creativity may be seen in profound sensory absorption in childhood that may then be expressed in adulthood in a developed or occupational expression. The path to this being developed may be seen in an extension of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) systems model, whereby support from the social context progressively, coincidentally, or synchronistically may gradually and repeatedly provide opportunities for prompting and developing an individual’s relationship with a “domain” of expression. Also, that within Wong’s Deep and Wide Hypothesis, and model of meaning, we see potential growth in individuals and their creative expression, sometimes in the face of adversity (Wong & Worth, 2017).

Development and changes to creative expression have been seen in the midlife period that are positive, which portrays potential changes to the content and/or process of expression (Worth, 2000).

Worth and Smith propose as a result of this that we may infer a connection to a form of creative expression in our lives which may occur at a wide range of ages, and this in turn may be seen as a development and expression of eudaimonia over time.

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