

**The Story of Creativity Within Our Lives:
Experiences and Events Which Shape This Becoming¹**

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Abstract

This paper explores how childhood and life experiences over time influence the appearance, recognition, development, and growth of creativity within individual lives. 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 key sources of changes to personal and creative development. This suggests that Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity can be seen more broadly as a "spiral" of experiences that support growth and development of individuals over time, as well as their eventual recognition for their creative work. The dynamics observed within individual development reflected Wong's (2012b) "PURE" and "ABCDE" model, and Wong and Worth's (2017) paper on the deep and wide hypothesis.

Introduction

The motivation of the first author for this area of interest and research came from a friendship with an established artist decades ago. This fascination with someone living a life in which creativity was a prime expression of the individual became Ph.D. research into the experiential patterns within lives of individuals recognised for their creativity. There is a long lineage of this type of exploration. For example, Goertzel and Goertzel (1962), Goertzel, Goertzel, and Goertzel (1978), Gedo and Gedo (1992), Jacques (1965), and Cohen-Shalev (1986, 1989) illustrate variously through studies of hundreds of individuals how specific life events appeared to steer them towards creative expression, how creative skill was used in order to

¹ This paper is based on a presentation given at the 2018 Meaning Conference.

process and illustrate an often painful experience, and how increasing age prompted positive changes in the nature and skills of creative output. With this focus, the term “life story” has two meanings in this paper: the story of the creative expression within an individual’s life, how it came about and changed, and how in turn this contributes to the “life story” of the individual. The focus of this paper is primarily on the first life story—of the emergence, presence, development, and expression of creativity in an individual’s life. The paper will summarise Worth’s (2000) earlier research findings; consider the development of these ideas via an intense individual case study; and then propose an incremental contribution to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) systems model of creativity as a result of these ideas.

Worth’s (2000) research into the biographies of 40 individuals with a reputation for creativity in their lives indicates a pattern of events and experiences which form and shape engagement with creative expression and skills and eventually output. Worth’s interpretation of the presence of creativity in these lives is that it represented both meaning central to the individual (Wong & Worth, 2017) and a central expression of who they were as people. As an educator and practising counsellor and psychotherapist, Worth poses the question of whether we can understand systematically what draws people to creative expression, and in what ways can they be supported in doing so, giving us the opportunity to bring about that development in ourselves or others. This connects to the core theme of the Meaning Conference in identifying and proposing an appropriate trust in the eudaimonic unfolding that the first author sees as a core reflection of existential positive psychology. The life journey and the practise of creativity are reflections of how we become more of who we truly are, and in turn Wong’s (2012a) writing and focus on the human search for meaning.

This paper proposes and explores 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 are 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 (see Table 1 for a summary of this research). At the time of the conference, he had a work-in-progress case study of the life of C. S. Lewis.

Table 1

Summary of Worth’s Ph.D.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ph.D. research (developmental psychology) • Biographic interviews with 40 individuals (45-60 years old; 24 males and 16 females) with a reputation for creativity in their context • 5,000 pages of interview analysis; 120,000-word thesis • Analytical method: thematic analysis • Patterns read across 40 lives and more • Validation: Feedback to interviewees, presentations at conferences |
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It is important at this point to clarify definitions of terms that might be used (Table 2).

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, whether “product”, process, or environment (Barron, 1988)?
- Eudaimonia: Could we assume that any of these are ways in which we find, develop, grow, and express the “best in us”, a 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 seeking, developing, and 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; see Table 3), albeit this was a sample of “normal” individuals.²

Table 3

Developmental patterns in early life experiences.

Exceptionally creative individuals have common patterns of experiences:

- First-born or only children
- Early signs of later creativity (literal; involvement of a specific skill)
- Home environment that was supportive; parents demonstrated interest and learning
- Schooling and teachers that saw, mirrored, and supported the capability of the younger person
- Influential adults that in turn became mentors or supporters
- Bereavement within the family/personal 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

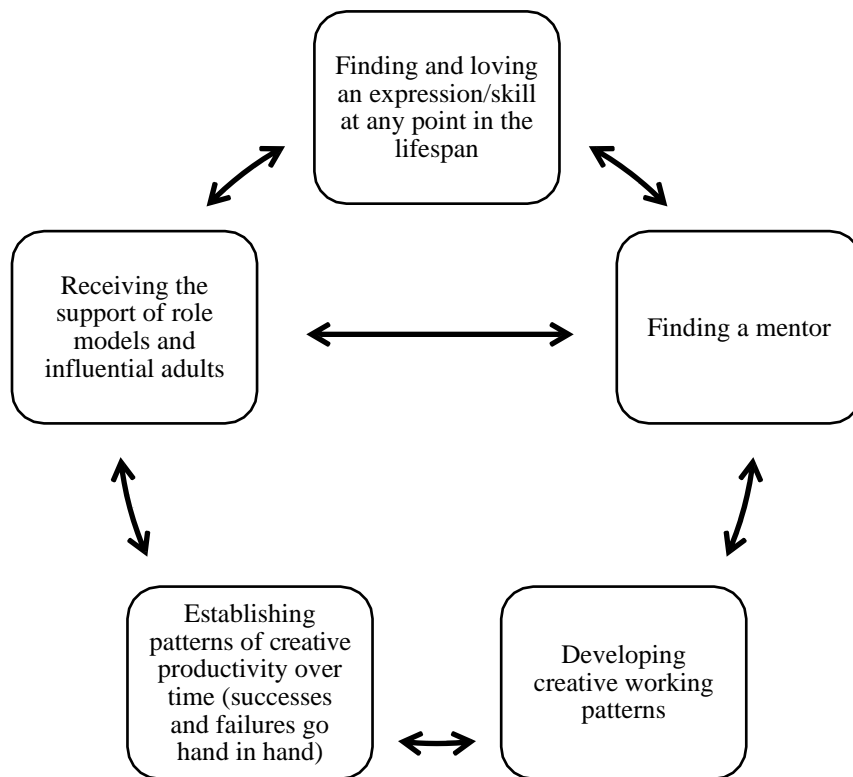
² It was striking to note at the time of Worth’s research that Psychology as a discipline saw normal, gifted, and exceptionally creative individuals as three separate groups, with different developmental patterns. Worth’s (2000) literature review established that the three bodies of developmental literature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

that time by parents, coaches, or mentors, which in turn became exceptional performance.

Worth's (2000) sample included this experience, and in addition a second trajectory where skill/talent were 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. The process for these research participants is illustrated and expanded upon in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Development and path of a creative life (linear process or spiral).



However, Worth's current work on a case study (described later in this paper) introduced a third possible path of involvement in creative expression. 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 or indicative of one).³ The younger experiences of these individuals appeared initially to become “latent”, unexplored or unconscious, and become “remembered” subsequently; however, the processes occurring were re-examined later.

Prompted by his work and experience as a teacher of positive psychology, and psychotherapist, Worth recognised that there was a number of people he encountered who appeared to still be 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, 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, seemingly originating 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 proposed characteristics (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1994, 1996). 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 as being a source of experience explored or expressed in creative output

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.

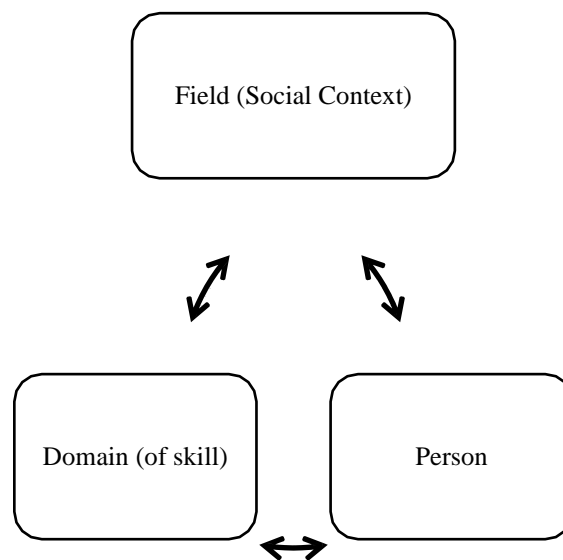
(Eisenstadt, 1978), Worth's sample portrayed creative skill as a coping mechanism or a way of finding a sense of safety in uncertain situations and the characteristics of the deep and wide hypothesis in creativity proposed by Wong (2012b) and Wong and Worth (2017). Worth interpreted this as a reflection 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.

In an effort to explain these events Worth was drawn to what he believed is a re-interpretation of Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) systems theory of creativity. This theory proposed that "creativity" exists and occurs within a system, not in an individual or product. Csikszentmihalyi suggested that the question is "Where is creativity?" This is portrayed in a three-part model summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Reinterpreting Csikszentmihalyi's systems theory of creativity in a three-part model



The three parts of the above Figure 2 are defined as follows: (1) The person is “the site of the acquisition and transformation of knowledge that has the possibility of changing ‘domains’ and ‘institutions’” (Feldman, 1994, p. 16); (2) the domain is the structure and organisation of a body of knowledge and skill on a topic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996); and (3) the field (or social context) is 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 (Feldman, 1994; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1999).

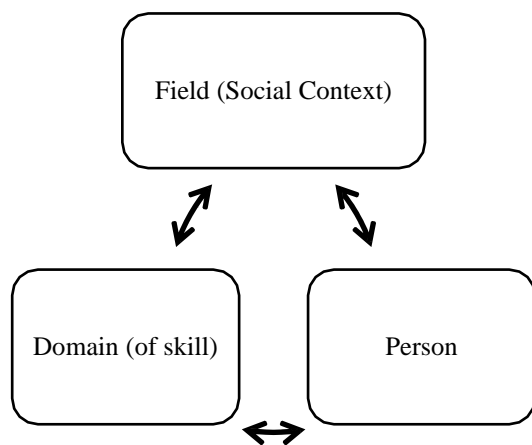
The participants in Worth’s study offered recurring examples of what he described as “influential adults” who had altered or changed the direction of these individuals in their creative expression or work. The types and behaviours of individuals included (a) role models, individuals who demonstrated work skills and practices aspired to by the other person; (b) mentors, individuals who offer recognition to another, give a work opportunity, and prompt a new understanding of their capability; (c) teachers, individuals who teach a new skill and challenge or change a way of thinking; and (d) authors, writers who have influenced via books, etc. There was an underlying pattern of recognition and support from others, leading to a “genealogy” of influence from one person to the other (i.e., Kanigel, 1993).

This argued that individuals were influenced over time by someone more experienced in their interest or context that shifted or changed their understanding. 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, if viewed this way, the systems model represents a cycle or spiral of effect over time rather than a linear one originally perceived by Worth in his doctoral research (Figure 1). Worth proposes in this paper

that it has the qualities of a spiral (Figure 3) 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 (2012b), which here is a passion and energy for creativity and its contribution both to the creator and the context in which it occurs.

Figure 3

Reinterpreting Csikszentmihalyi’s systems theory of creativity as a spiralling three-part model.



Changes to Creativity in the Mid-Life Period

Within Worth’s (2000) sample, changes to creativity in the mid-life saw a proportion of individuals re-connecting with a “love” or skill that had appeared in earlier life but had not been developed or expressed at that time. There was the clear inference in the research data that they found through this in mid-life an expression of creativity and greater meaning within their lives (Wong, 2012b). Alternatively, within the broader sample, it was evident that there were changes to the content or processes of pre-existing creativity. This involved entering new “domains” of skill and expression or processes of working that were positive 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

While broad-based studies involving large numbers of participants are helpful to determine the characteristics of creative lives, intensive or depth-case studies may allow for additional detail or understanding to be found (e.g., John-Steiner, 2000). Worth’s research has thus moved to case studies of individuals. C. S. Lewis is the first of these.

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 (Lewis, 1955) and biographies (Downing, 2002; Duriez, 2003, 2013; Wilson, 1990) it is evident that from 3-years-old 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 *Tegnér’s Drapa*, *The Northern Sky*; views of the countryside from their house (i.e., Belfast Lough and the Antrim Mountains). Lewis (1955) wrote, “The central story of my life is about nothing else” than this experience of joy (p. 18).

Lewis’ mother died when he was aged 10, within two weeks of which he was sent, with his older brother, to a physically abusive boarding school wherein very little teaching occurred. Lewis gradually move to atheism in his teens. However, 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 (Downing, 2002; Duriez, 2003, 2013; Lewis, 1955; Wilson, 1990).

How do these relate in what Downing (2005) described as an “idyllic childhood to a traumatic boyhood” to his mid-life experiences? Lewis’ descriptions of the sensory intensity of his childhood experiences, the draw to nature, the sense of life and story in nature and animals, and mythic stories in “The Northern Sky” beyond his home are portrayed by him as foundational to interests and expression later (Lewis, 1955). The experiences of bereavement and cruel schooling are portrayed as blocks, delays, barriers to further exploring these earlier experiences. Yet his personal searching, studies, and writing that had a mythic quality (Carpenter, 1978/2006; Duriez, 2003, 2013, 2015; Knight, 2010) all became a path back to the intensity of earlier experiences and a period of profound and extensive creativity in his life. His portrayal of the dynamism in conversations with friends, exploratory, redefining, suggests how creativity is explored, discovered, and rediscovered in the social context (“The Inklings”) that he cared about and found most stimulating.

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, 2012b).

Conclusions

The exploration of research data from Worth (2000) and Downing (2002), Duriez (2003, 2013), Lewis (1955), and Wilson (1990) suggests that early signs or experiences 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 mid-life period that are positive, which portrays potential changes to the content and/or process of expression (Worth, 2000).

We 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—finding, growing, and expressing the best in us over time.

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