

Phillip McIntyre 08

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The Systems Model of Creativity: Analyzing the Distribution of Power in the Studio

Phillip McIntyre

University of
Newcastle, NSW.

phillip.mcintyre@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract

It has been proposed that creativity comes about as result of a system in operation rather than, as a Romantic ethos would have it, being the result of the action of single individuals alone. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the field in which cultural production occurs can be described as an arena of social contestation. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests, as well, that conflict within a field may also have an effect on that creative field's output. If these statements are true then questions of power relationships become important in any analysis of creativity. In particular, analyzing Csikszentmihalyi's systems approach to creativity and Bourdieu's understanding of cultural production and what these conceptions have to say about the distribution of creative power in the studio may reveal important truths about creativity itself. It may also shed some light on the nature of the collaboration that occurs within creative groups; in this case those that consist of musicians, producers, record companies and technicians.

1 Introduction

Keith Negus and Michael Pickering have argued that a 'critical interrogation of creativity should be central to any understanding of musical production' (in Hesmondhalgh & Negus 2002: 147). As discussed in prior articles (McIntyre 2001, 2004a, 2006, 2007a, 2007b & 2008) recent thinking on creativity, in research terms at least, suggests that this phenomenon comes about through a multifactorial process and is centered in the confluence of these factors (Amabile 1983 & 1996, Gruber 1988, Dacey & Lennon 1998, Simonton 2003, Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi & Gardner 1994, Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 1997 & 1999, Weisberg 1993 and Sternberg & Lubart 1991 & 1992). Each of these so called confluence approaches includes to some varying degree social, cultural and psychological factors which need to be in place for creativity to occur.

Additionally, a search of the literature also reveals a certain set of commonalities in the definitional components used to delineate what creativity may be (for reviews see Rothenberg & Hausman 1976, Zolberg 1990, Bergquist 1999, Sternberg 1999, Runco & Pritzker 1999, Negus & Pickering 2004, Pope 2005 and Sawyer 2006). From this search it can be seen that creativity is a productive activity whereby objects, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting.

This understanding of creativity, an amalgam of the definitions and critical ideas pertinent to and argued about in the research literature on creativity, springs from the rationalist perspective that has tended to dominate research into creativity at least since A.P. Guilford's address to the American Psychological Association in the 1950s (Sawyer 2006: 40). This rationalist perspective has had to contend with a longstanding and antithetical point of view that has been labeled variously the romantic or inspirationist view of creativity. Unfortunately, these latter views:

are believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined. They are not theories, so much as myths: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears, and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them (Boden 2004: 14).

While Margaret

Boden has been blunt in her appraisal of these romantic and inspirationist understandings of creativity they still tend to hold sway, in a commonsense way, in many studio practices and beliefs. As Vera Zolberg, and others, have noted there is still a belief in the idea that we are dealing with quasi-neurotic artists who see their own creative activity as fundamentally self-expressive and, importantly for this paper, supposedly free from any discernible constraint (Zolberg 1990, Petrie 1991, Watson 2005, Sawyer 2006). This set of mythic beliefs has tended to focus concerns about creativity onto the individual artist who is perceived to be at the centre this art world. These ideas are 'perpetuated in many of the myths that surround the recording studio. The Dionysian tales of artists working under the inspiration of whatever muse is popular at the time are legendary' (McIntyre 2008: 1). These commonsense perspectives, which are themselves culturally and historically specific, have:

...bound

art to personality, individuality and lifestyle, but at the same time made it possible to see in art the liberation of man by reminding him of his own inner potential. Being creative meant removing the barriers which imprison man from within, meant self-realization and freedom...Behind the criticism of commerce, which was seen as the opposite of creativity and communication, lay the Romantic appeal to the autonomy of the artist (Wicke 1990: 98-99).

Romanticism, as Wicke argues, is a myth that persists especially in artists' approach to the studio. As such W.I. Thomas's dictum must then become relevant to this analysis. This dictum states that the way people perceive a situation and the meanings they ascribe to specific actions predisposes them to behave according to those perceptions even if the perception is flawed. As Thomas asserts, 'it is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct - if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas 1928: 571-572). Once a belief like Romanticism becomes naturalized to the extent that it has in studio practice, whether or not all rationalist research points to it being a myth, 'gradually

a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself [sic]’ (Thomas 1967: 42) becomes based on the beliefs they hold and their actions are consequently premised on it.

It follows, therefore, that if one changes the perspective on creativity it can be argued that a different set of practical actions, theoretical pursuits and eventually a new set of beliefs will spring from the reconceptualization of creativity. Accordingly, this reconceptualization will also set up a differing conception of power relationships in the studio to those that emanate from a belief in Romanticism.

2 Creative Action in the Studio: The Systems Model

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has proposed a model of creativity that asserts that creativity results from the dynamic operation of ‘a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 6).

Csikszentmihalyi asserts that the interconnections shown in the systems model [see Figure 1] are grounded in ‘dynamic links of circular causality’ (1988: 329). Therefore ‘the starting point on this map is purely arbitrary’ (ibid). While the model has had its critiques (Pope 2005, Weisberg 2007) it is important to realize that each component in the system is integral to it with one being no more important or less necessary than the other. In short ‘each of the three main systems – person, field and domain – affects the others and is affected by them in turn’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1988: 329). Each component is a necessary factor in creativity but not sufficient, in and of itself, to produce novelty.

Figure 1. “For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain. The variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 315).

Csikszentmihalyi has used different metaphors and analogies at various times to help explain the necessary interrelationships the system model highlights.

For example, he suggests that in a comparable manner to the action of creativity a fire needs three factors to be in place in order for it to occur; in this case tinder, oxygen and a spark. Without any one of these necessary components being operative fire will simply not occur. But people tend to look at the spark alone to isolate the cause of fire. Similarly when investigating creativity both

researchers and lay-people will most often attempt to account for creativity by concentrating on individuals alone. However this disregards the necessary social and cultural factors at play. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that:

to study creativity by focusing on the individual alone is like trying to understand how an apple tree produces fruit by looking only at the tree and ignoring the sun and the soil that support its life…In other words, if one wants to understand creativity, it does not make any more sense to turn to a study of the individual than it would to a study of the field or of the domain. Real understanding may, however, come from investigating the interaction among all three’ (Csikszentmihalyi quoted in McIntyre 2004b: 6).

Csikszentmihalyi also argues that in order to understand creativity fully ‘we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the centre of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information’ (1988: 336). With these images, metaphors and analogies in mind one can then ask what each component in the system of creativity brings to its operation.

The domain, in terms of Csikszentmihalyi’s model, is the symbol system that the person and others working in the area utilize. It is comprised of the conventions, the knowledges, the system of symbolic codes and techniques the person must become immersed in, in order for novel variations to be made. For record producers the knowledge systems, skills and techniques they need to be aware of in order to make an impact in the studio include, but are not limited to, a knowledge of rhythm, melody, harmony, song structure, arrangement and instrumentation, some form of an understanding of psychoacoustics in order to effect changes in the emotional characteristics of a performance, knowledge of what constitutes a good performance and, increasingly, techniques for getting the most out of the technological apparatus in the studio.

In addition since the domain also includes ‘all of the created products that have been accepted by the field in the past’ (Sawyer 2006: 125) a producer must also be aware, sometimes at extraordinary depth, of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the field of works. The field of works, as distinct from fields themselves, is the accumulated cultural work completed up to this time in a particular field. According to Jason Toynbee (2000) the field of works includes, in a manner reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi’s use of the term domain, techniques and codes of production. For Bourdieu it is a ‘system or schemata of thought’ (1996: 236). As such the ‘heritage accumulated by collective work presents itself to each agent as a space of possibles, that is, as an ensemble of probable constraints which are the condition and the counterpart of a set of possible uses [italicised in original]’ (Bourdieu 1996: 235). For a record producer this field of works, or its comparative term the domain, includes the body of songs they use as a template to make judgements in the studio. The more a producer understands the domain the stronger their knowledge will be and the greater their ability to produce work in a studio situation. Richard Burgess, for example, asserts that his experience in top forty bands was critical to his work as a producer:

I hated it at the time but later when I started to write and produce, I realized that having to learn and play all those hits had instilled in me an instinct for what works and what doesn’t. I didn’t have to think about how to construct a hit. I just knew (quoted in McIntyre 2008: 3).

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) also suggests there are some important ways, in general, the domain can contribute to the creative system. These include; its clarity of structure, that is, how well organized it is as a symbol system, its centrality within the culture, that is, its place within the cultural hierarchies it has to compete with for funding and, its accessibility, that is, how readily it is able to be transmitted from one person, one cultural producer, to the next.

What does the person bring to the system of creativity? The answer could be summarized quite quickly as nature, nurture and access. An individual's personal life experiences, their familial position, their class and gender, their peculiar biological attributes manifest in talent, and many other shared and unique characteristics would predispose them to acquire and use knowledge of certain domains and not others and allow them to act easily in one field and not another.

The field, on the other hand, is the social organization, the hierarchy of groups and individuals who deal with and can influence the knowledge system, the specific cultural domain, on a regular basis. The field is thus 'a complex network of experts with varying expertise, status, and power' (Sawyer 2006:124) If the field is 'made up of experts in a given domain whose job involves passing judgment on performance in that domain' (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 42) then a list of those people who have the varying expertise and power to perform this function in the field of record production would need to include a producer's peers in the studio, that is, other producers, engineers and musicians, as well as A&R executives. These would constitute, as Pierre Bourdieu would also have it (Negus, 1996: 67), the immediate cultural intermediaries who can affect change directly. Importantly 'cultural intermediaries do not work as gate-keepers who filter products according to organisational conventions, but as mediators' (Negus 1996: 62-63) who contribute their input to the studio project's creative output.

As Sawyer (2006: 127) also indicates, not only are there a set of intermediaries but a creative individual working in the studio is also aware, even if it is implicitly, of the broader audience. The audience includes the layers of connoisseurs, amateurs, and publics the production is aimed at. All of these 'have an influence on the creative process, even if the creator is alone in a room in the woods' (Sawyer 2006: 128). The intermediaries in the field may play a critical role in evaluating and contributing to creative works but, as Sawyer argues, 'after they've made their choices, the ultimate test for a creative work is whether or not it's accepted by a broad audience' (Sawyer 2006: 126-127).

In many ways the audience, who use the output in expected and unexpected ways and also actively engage in the creative construction of meaning, is always 'the elephant in the room' at every recording session. Since creators 'internalize an anticipated reception of their work as a part of the process of production' (Robbins 2007: 84) that audience is an unspoken and potent presence whose acceptance and approval is always being worked toward even by those who insist on the Romantic nature of their task.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997: 44) argues, additionally, that the field contributes to the creative system by choosing a broad or narrow filter to select novelty. That is, it can allow a significant number and variety of novel changes into the domain or narrow the prospects of success in producing original works by only selecting a limited number of changes to the domain to count as creative works as periodically happens in the field of popular music. The field can also contribute by being conservative or

adventurous, by being reactive or proactive in soliciting novelty or it may do both at different times dependent on circumstances occurring within the wider society. The field of popular music, as a matter of course, needs new songs to continue to operate. Songs, and the recordings they exist on, keep distribution outlets working, customers satisfied on youtube, myspace and itunes, recording operations busy, touring and production companies on the road and the coffers of publishing houses full.

It is also critical for a domain's success for the field, the social organization that is concerned with that domain knowledge, to be well connected to the rest of the social system and thus able to channel support in the form of financial, political, cultural and moral influence into that particular domain (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 44). The vertical and horizontal integration of the music industry, which includes not only recording but the publishing and performance arms of that industry, with other corporate entities, plays its part in this process as does the cultural and social necessity of popular music itself. In this sense the sociohistorical context a music community exists in is significant to what is produced within it.

The community pays for and supports the music, whether directly with money or indirectly by allowing the performers to live as musicians. Community support usually influences the future direction of the music. In a complex society such as that of the United States, various communities support different kinds of music - classical, rock, jazz, gospel - and they do so in different ways. Classical music for example gets its strongest boost from middle class people climbing the social and economic ladder. When music becomes a mass-media commodity, then packaging, marketing, and advertising are as crucial to the success of musicians as to perfume. How the community relates to the music-makers has a profound effect on the music (Slobin & Todd Titon 1992: 13).

The community, or in this case the field of popular music, is thus a powerful component in the creative system. However, while 'competition among new memes[1] is fierce' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997:372) it can be argued that, even at the level of society, 'too much divisiveness, as well as its opposite, too much uniformity, are unlikely to generate novelty that will be accepted and preserved' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999:323). As such, it can be seen that the entire field is a setting for value distinction and a site of social validation.

3 Bourdieu and Cultural Producers

The notion of a field being important to creativity and cultural production is not a new one. Using the same term, and I would argue describing much the same phenomena as Csikszentmihalyi, Pierre Bourdieu described a field as an arena of social contestation. While Csikszentmihalyi's use of the term field tends to emphasize its Darwinian functionality Bourdieu, revealing his Marxist roots, conceives of the field in a complex and conflictual way. For him fields can be seen as dynamic spaces which 'denote arenas of production, circulation and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to

accumulate and monopolize...different kinds of capital" (Swartz 1997: 117).

Given that competition and struggle are central to Bourdieu's thinking on fields, the use of capital within them can be seen as the pivot point around which power relationships resolve themselves within the field. However, this is not a simple process as, for Bourdieu, there are crucial distinctions to be made between various forms of capital. These various forms of capital include:

economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and social capital, made up of social obligations (connections), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986: 243).

It is obvious to anyone who has spent time in the studio environment that the provision of economic capital as patronage, such as that supplied by record companies in order to finance a producer's, engineer's and musician's time in the studio, often seen most immediately in the budgets allocated by A&R people, brings with it a certain amount of leverage. For the people working in Motown's studio in Detroit this economic capital had both direct and indirect effects.

As Raymond Williams has argued "producers often internalize known or possible market relationships and this is a very complex process indeed", (in Robinson et al 1991: 239). Furthermore "the influence of the market - what will sell - is important in shaping the content and form of the musical product" (Robinson et al 1991: 238). For Motown:

as the market indicated its preference for certain types of Motown product, the company's core of songwriters and producers gained more self-confidence in their own personal sound and a house-style began to emerge. By 1962 those artist whose potential was proven, or was considered promising, started to receive the most attention while acts of questionable commercial viability were eased out (White in Brown 1982: 714).

In this way the Motown "creative team forged the unique Motown sound" (ibid) which emanated, in part, from a form of self-regulation which moved the studio's output in certain directions.

While the patronage supplied by economic capital, derived in part from the market and from company largesse, is crucial to the ongoing operation of the creative system social capital also produces leverage for those who possess it. Work for a producer comes in many cases from a personal connection to the people they work with or people they could potentially work with. Don Gehman, for example, worked for eight years as a live FOH engineer "until he met Stephen Stills" (Olsen et al 1999: 266). Stills offered Gehman an opportunity to help finish a recording and the results impressed Stills who:

"...took Gehman to Criteria Studios in Miami, Florida, and set him up. "At the time it was Atlantic South," he says referring to the record label. "Tom Dowd was there, Jerry Wexler, Arif Mardin" (ibid).

As another example, the ability to have a certain musical part played the way a producer wants it played will often come from knowing the right session player who can play the part with the least amount of bother or the most efficiency. In short, it is advisable for a record producer to have a certain amount of social capital in order to make and keep the necessary connections, the 'web of interpersonal relationships' (Turow 1982: 126) most studio work is built on. In the words of Hank Shocklee, studio operatives must 'network, network, network, network' (2007).

However, both economic and social capital also have some relation to cultural capital. As Randall Johnson explains cultural capital is:

a form of knowledge, an internalised code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts (in Bourdieu 1993: 7).

The possession of this type of capital is generally acquired through a long process of inculcation into the field and allows the agent, the person working in the field, to gain possession of a meaningful understanding of the works produced. For Bourdieu a cultural product has 'meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (in Bourdieu 1993: 7). In this case the possession of cultural knowledge, usually acquired personally through an immersion in the domain or the field of works, becomes related to the ability to wield power.

As an example, if a record producer understands and can demonstrate the usefulness of the one drop beat - that is, withdrawing the sound from the initial downbeat in a reggae tune and placing the emphasis on the third beat of a four beat bar, as a form of rhythmic device that clearly creates space for other instruments to exist in and one first popularised by Carlton Barrett from Bob Marley's rhythm section - that producer will be able to manipulate the studio practice of certain musicians who share to a degree those cultural competences. Lee Scratch Perry (Perry 2008: 38), while working in Black Ark Studios in Jamaica, might have had more than enough cultural capital to obtain compliance under these circumstances. However, if a producer is dealing with a swing band a different form of cultural capital will have more value. A knowledge, be it formal or informal, of the peculiarities of a shuffle beat, which is achieved by playing a triplet feel but not including the middle note of the triplet and how that rhythm is a little more exact than swing time and how the loose connection between a straight time bass line and a swung traps player helped produce a rhythm characteristic of early rock and roll, will all have more cache, more cultural capital, with a band of that ilk. In this case someone like Dave Bartholomew (Olsen et al 1999: 36-38) working with Cosimo Matassa in J&M Studios in New Orleans, would possibly hold the necessary cultural capital to use as an authoritative tool in achieving the end results he was after.

Without a demonstration of a sound working knowledge of microphone characteristics and placement and the ability to deploy this knowledge profitably in the studio, an engineer would also find it difficult to impress on a producer or musician the necessity for using an unusual microphone set up, as Geoff Emerick (in Martin 1983) and Richard Lush (2007) have so often done. The use of this sort of domain knowledge and the deployment of an engineer's skill and technique is significant as this capital gives these

engineers a certain set of influences in the overall creative process (McIntyre & Paton, 2008).

It can be seen then that a producer's and an engineer's ability to wield power within the field, and therefore get things done in the studio, is dependent in many instances on the accumulation of cultural capital they hold as well as the maintenance of social relations within the field. These forms of capital don't operate in isolation from each other but are, of course, interdependent.

Further to this, a degree of symbolic capital is also a critical factor in the way processes of power operate in the studio. As Marshall argues, 'the power of celebrity status appears in business, politics, and artistic communities' (1997: 2) not the least of which is the popular music industry. Celebrity in this case acts as 'a way of providing distinctions and definitions of success' (ibid) for those working in the studio and this 'celebrity status confers on the person a certain discursive power' (ibid).

A producer like Phil Ramone, for example, who has produced and worked with Paul McCartney, Frank Sinatra, Paul Simon, Billy Joel, Gloria Estafan, Barbra Streisand and many, many others needs no real introduction in a studio setting. It can be argued his abilities are written all over his curriculum vitae, in the awards he has garnered and the multiple successes he has had. He is 'no less than an icon in the subculture of professional producers and engineers' (Massey 2000: 49). If he rings, makes a suggestion or offers an opinion on a production he has the weight of his considerable symbolic capital to affirm his position, status, role and thus influence in the studio.

Ranged against this powerful presence in the studio are the reputations of the engineers and musicians producers work with. It would be very difficult for a lesser producer, for example, to coerce, cajole or manipulate Paul McCartney into playing what he did not want to play no matter what the reputation of the producer. McCartney's considerable power would override this through his deploying, deliberately or not, his own symbolic and cultural capital as an artist. As an illustration of his position in the cultural pantheon Beatle's producer Sir George Martin describes a scene at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction for McCartney in 1999 in Cleveland. In the green room were Jimmy Page and Ahmet Ertegun, as well as Neil Young, Bono, Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen, Billie Joel, Robbie Robertson and a host of other musicians, producers and various celebrities. In an aside Martin confided 'just wait to see how this lot react the minute Paul arrives' (quoted in Barrow & Bextor 2004: 15). When McCartney entered the room:

the entire collection of noble rock stars just froze. The silence was palpable...It was uncanny how the whole room was there to pay deference to this man, just as the awaiting media were. The musicians in the room, big stars, genuinely famous across the planet and rightly full of their own achievement, seemed to unite in recognising that here was the head boy, the role model that defined pop star, that personified creativity, songwriting and fame (Barrow & Bextor 2004: 15-16).

To a lesser degree a similar set of power relationships occurs for artists such as Sting, as demonstrated in his role as songwriter for The Police during their heyday.

Most often, and

especially in group situations, songwriters such as Sting hold a differing status to their fellow performers with not only a different set of financial remunerations but also a resultant set of contrasting behaviors that emanate from the influence they hold. For example, Stewart Copeland, formerly of the Police, realized the power Sting, the principal songwriter, wielded within that group. The knowledge of his role as the recognized primary source of song material was evident in the way Sting was treated in relation to the status of the other members of the band:

He's the star of the show. Everyone's running around for him. He is getting incredible amounts of money. Whereas in the movie world he'll have to work under directors and he can't say 'I'll be two hours late' or 'I'm canceling that' whenever he wants to (Copeland in Sutcliffe and Felder 1981: 94).

Producer/engineers such as Nigel Gray and Hugh Padgham needed to deal with these behaviors, behaviors premised on an increasing leverage held by Sting as the band and his songs became more successful. This leverage was useful not only in the studio but in his wider relations with his record company and large support network. As Sutcliffe and Felder explain:

Being the hope of the team does produce enormous pressure, probably more so on Sting than the other members of the band because he has to produce the raw material: songs. As Stewart relates: 'there's one immediate way of getting yourself fired from A&M, the ultimate no-no. You go up to Sting and say, 'Written any good tunes lately?' Of course tunes have been flowing out of Sting since he was in short trousers. But their function has changed. Now they have to entertain millions, producing huge profits and employment in every sphere touched by the rock business - not just record companies but pressing plants, sleeve and label printers and designers, badge and T-shirt makers, journalism, publishing, printing, newsagents, TV and radio. And authors. That's what Sting has to put behind him when he settles down to write. 'If you're trying to be creative, trying to be original, you can't come up with a brilliant idea every day. It just doesn't happen,' he says. 'I used to go through months and months of paranoia about it, but the more you worry about it the worse it gets.' It's during these blocks that the conflict of emotions about his special place within the band reaches an acute pitch: 'I know for a fact when we're approaching an album Stewart and Andy are thinking 'we'll write a few songs okay, but Sting will write the album'. And I know I've got to do it, but is it there? I do resent that...even though there'd be terrible trouble if they did suddenly come up with the best songs, just hell!' (ibid: 81).

It can be argued then that the changes that occur in a field, the struggles that take place in this arena of social contestation, are often built around a distinction being made not only in a person's reputation, as seen in the operation of their symbolic capital, but also the amount of economic, social and cultural capital they can bring into play.

[Go to page 2 of this article](#)

[1] According to the originator of the term, Richard Dawkins (1976), 'memes' are the smallest units of cultural information that replicate themselves and are seen as culturally analogous to genes. While this proposition has given rise to a new field of study called 'memetics' the proposition is, itself, still somewhat contentious.