

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CREATIVITY

Zulfanova Nigina Nuritdinovna

Lecturer at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Abstract: This article reflects on the historical development of creativity. At the same time, the concept of creativity can only be fully understood when viewed from a historical perspective. When we examine the historical progress of creativity, history teaches us that just as society is in constant change, our views on creativity and creative individuals are also subject to change.

Keywords: creativity, history, human, thought, world, professional, personal / individual

Introduction. We all, at least potentially, are creative throughout our lives. Creativity is essentially the process of generating new ideas. In today's rapidly changing world, creativity is not a luxury but a necessity. Creativity is the key to success in almost all areas of life, whether personal or professional. According to some researchers, creativity stems from and strengthens a person's inner strength and the general belief in the ability to create something new. Therefore, today's interest in and admiration for creativity is not an "ordinary" or "natural" phenomenon; rather, it must be understood within social, scientific, technological, economic, and political contexts. In other words, this concept can only be fully understood from a historical perspective. Looking at the historical development of creativity, history teaches us that just as societies are constantly changing, so too are our views on creativity and creative individuals¹. Therefore, the current interest in and admiration for creativity is not an "ordinary" or "natural" phenomenon; rather, it must be understood within social, scientific, technological, economic, and political contexts. In other words, this concept can only be fully comprehended from a historical perspective. When we look at the historical development of creativity, history teaches us that just as society is constantly changing, so too are our views on creativity and creative individuals. Understanding how unstable our views on creativity are encourages us to reflect on questions such as: "Why have we arrived at the current state?" and "How might these

¹ Negus, K., & Pickering, M. (2004). *Creativity, communication and cultural value*. London: Sage.

views change in the future?” In this sense, referring to the history of creativity helps humanity to better understand not only its past but also its present condition and future.

At the same time, the history of creativity cannot be studied outside the context of the history of civilization and ideas. If creativity is a “product” of the modern era, its earlier forms—such as genius, talent, invention, discovery, or imagination—were interpreted in ways completely different from today. These concepts have always been closely connected with the social, political, and economic conditions of their time². It can be said that writing about the history of ideas, in particular, is always complex and requires caution. Such attempts are always at risk of misinterpreting the past from the perspective of the present—known as “presentism.” For example, when viewed through the lens of today’s standards, medieval societies often appear excessively traditionalist, closed, and stable—that is, environments not conducive to the development of creativity. These works are considered genuine creative products. However, such “creativity” was neither understood nor named in the same way during that period. For instance, the creators of historical works at that time were usually not regarded as having personal “authorship” rights or as individual creators (this situation in medieval literature is illustrated in Orhan Pamuk’s famous novel *My Name is Red*). The idea of the individual as the center of creativity is a relatively recent concept³.

The inconsistencies mentioned above inevitably make any historical account selective and incomplete. This article is no exception, as our aim here is not to fully cover all events, individuals, and ideas that contributed to the development of creativity, but rather to approach the subject from a general historical perspective. Importantly, we begin this brief study with the idea that there is no single, definitive, and universal history of creativity⁴. On the contrary, there are multiple “histories” of creativity, each with its own distinctive approaches and interpretations; each history tells its own story. In this article, we focus specifically on the development of key historical debates that have been important in creativity research up to the present day. However, before addressing these issues, it is necessary to answer one fundamental question.

² Glăveanu, V. P. (2017a). From fantasy and imagination to creativity: Towards both a ‘psychology with soul’ and a ‘psychology with others’. In B. Wagoner, I. Bresco & S. H. Awad (Eds.), *The psychology of imagination: History, theory and new research horizons* (pp. 175-189). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

³ Hanchett Hanson, M. (2015). *Worldmaking: Psychology and the ideology of creativity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ Mason, J. H. (2003). *The value of creativity: The origins and emergence of a modern belief*. Hampshire: Ashgate.

For many, the history of creativity research is considered to have begun quite recently, that is, in the 18th or 19th centuries, while scientific studies of creativity started even later — in the mid-20th century⁵. Due to this relatively short history, greater attention has often been given to studying historical creative works and their authors or analyzing how creativity has manifested over time⁶. However, the distinctive history of the concept of “creativity” itself is often overlooked. We want to emphasize that the former (i.e., historical works and creators) cannot be fully separated from the latter (i.e., the history of the concept of “creativity”). A full appreciation of past creative activities is only possible by understanding how they were perceived in their own time — including how they were connected to “creativity” or, more precisely, through the concepts that were used at that time to express these phenomena.

One excellent example that demonstrates the importance of history, especially ancient history, is a careful analysis of the word “creativity” itself. At this point, we examine the etymological roots and origins of the word “creativity.” The word derives from the Latin verb *creare*, which means “to create” or “to bring something into existence.” However, this concept was not applied to human activity for centuries. On the contrary, the idea of “creation” was primarily associated with God or the life-giving forces of nature. Different words, such as *ars* and *artis*, were used for human acts of “creation” — terms closer to today’s understanding of art.⁷ Therefore, the earliest uses of the word “create” in the 13th century were only in the passive form, meaning “created.” It was not until the 15th century that the present tense (to create) and present participle (creating) forms of this verb began to be used⁸. From the ideas presented above, we can conclude that for centuries creativity was linked not to humans but to a divine power. This view was first questioned during the Renaissance and gradually completely transformed by the Enlightenment.

The word “creativity” was first recorded in 1875 in Adolfus William Ward’s *History of English Dramatic Literature*, where it was used in relation to Shakespeare’s “poetic creativity.” The use of this word marked a significant shift in our understanding of “creation”: whereas previously the phenomenon was seen as something that had already occurred and was beyond

⁵ Becker, M. (1995). Nineteenth century foundations of creativity research. *Creativity Research Journal*, 8(3), 219-229.

⁶ Simonton, D. K. (2003). Creative cultures, nations, and civilizations: Strategies and results. In P. Paulus and B. Nijstad (eds.), *Group creativity: Innovation through collaboration* (pp. 304-325). New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Weiner, R. P. (2000). *Creativity and beyond: Cultures, values, and change*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

⁸ Pope, R. (2005). *Creativity: Theory, history, practice*. London: Routledge.

human capacity, it began to be interpreted as a continuous process, even as a generalized human trait⁹. However, the word did not immediately become widespread. It took more than fifty years, along with major social shifts such as World War II, for it to enter common usage. Subsequently, the term “creativity” made its way into dictionaries and spread beyond English into other languages. According to several foreign researchers, the brief history of the word “creativity” offers us several lessons. Firstly, the history of any phenomenon does not begin when it is named; it can and should be traced through earlier times, words, and belief systems. Secondly, although today we apply the term “creativity” to great works of the past, their authors and contemporary audiences would not have understood the concept in its current meaning¹⁰. Thirdly, contemporary creativity research must take into account the historical context of the field — that is, this concept is a hallmark of our modern, secular, democratic, and capitalist society..¹¹

Results/Discussions. Before focusing on various “histories” related to important debates about creativity in the main part of this brief scientific study, it is important to acknowledge a key narrative concerning the historical development of this concept. This narrative is relatively simple and clear. From ancient times, including the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, creative acts were regarded as the result of divine inspiration¹². The Renaissance marks the starting point of a long process that transferred the center of creativity from God to humans. This movement reached its peak during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods through the figure of the “genius.” After World War II, the scientific study of creativity intensified, which ultimately led to a better balance between individual (personal) and social approaches.

The history of creativity is a long quest to find accurate explanations of how and why people create. In today’s age of global communication and rapid interaction, significant changes in the understanding of creativity may occur. Initially, it is easy to divide the historical development of creativity into two main stages: before and after Guilford’s famous 1950 speech at the American Psychological Association (APA). This speech marked several important

⁹ Weiner, R. P. (2000). *Creativity and beyond: Cultures, values, and change*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

¹⁰ Hanchett Hanson, M. (2015). *Worldmaking: Psychology and the ideology of creativity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Weiner, R. P. (2000). *Creativity and beyond: Cultures, values, and change*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

¹² Kearney, K. (2009). History of creativity. In B. Kerr (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent* (pp. 425-427). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

distinctions: attention to scientific research on creativity increased; creativity became a direct subject of study, whereas previously it was often conflated with related concepts; and a common, unified language in this field began to form¹³.

Some researchers, notably Simonton, support a more “inclusive” approach, meaning they consider not only the period after 1950 but also the century before as part of the history of creativity. Building on Weiner’s work, we take an even broader perspective and trace the history back to the Stone Age. We have very limited information about the nature, value, and meaning of creative acts during the Stone Age and earlier periods. However, there is a clear paradox: although those societies are often regarded as simple, static, and resistant to change, some of the most significant inventions in human history occurred precisely in those times. These include the domestication of animals, the invention of writing (the alphabet), the founding of cities, and the creation of artworks that have survived to this day. Importantly, people of that era valued certain created things so highly that they carefully preserved and passed them down to subsequent generations. Yet, it remains quite unclear how these achievements were recognized or to whom they belonged.

If we refer to the oldest sources, the first creative acts were often regarded as divine miracles. This view is clearly expressed in the Jewish sacred text — the Hebrew Bible. It describes God’s power to create things that did not exist in heaven and on earth. According to researcher Weiner, this story about creation has had a significant impact on Western thought¹⁴. Since God created man in His own image, humans can also participate in God’s creativity — that is, by fulfilling the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” In this sense, human creativity is limited and carried out under God’s instructions.

Interestingly, the ancient Greeks — a people associated with some of the greatest creative achievements of antiquity — were also cautious in their attitude toward human creativity. For example, we can refer to the myth of Prometheus. He steals fire to give to humans and, according to some accounts, teaches them the foundations of art and science. His courage, generosity, and intelligence are not praised; on the contrary, he is eternally punished for defying the gods. This myth is often interpreted as a warning about the dangers of being excessively “creative” and disrupting the cosmic order.

¹³ Dacey, J. (1999). Concepts of creativity: A history. In M. Runco & S. Pritzker (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Creativity*, vol 1 (pp. 309-322). San Diego: Academic Press.

¹⁴ Weiner, R. P. (2000). *Creativity and beyond: Cultures, values, and change*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ancient Greek tragedies carried a similar message, advising audiences to be cautious in order not to provoke the wrath of the gods. In return, the gods inspired humans. For example, Homer attributed a divine power to his poetic works, while Plato often referred to the Muses as sources of inspiration. In ancient times, attitudes toward creativity were contradictory: on one hand, it was seen as divine and worthy of reverence, and on the other hand, as dangerous and disruptive to order¹⁵. During the Middle Ages, especially in Western Europe, the belief was widespread that humans could not truly create; creation was considered solely the right of God. However, surprisingly, it was precisely the Church during this period that financed what we now consider “great works of creativity,” such as sculpture, paintings, jewelry, and architectural masterpieces.

The main purpose of these works of art was to glorify God, and therefore, it was forbidden to display signs of individuality and authorship in the pieces. Nevertheless, these approaches were probably based on the collective production of art — master craftsmen or guilds of jewelers worked together collaboratively. It is important to note that medieval societies were not static but were in a constant state of change — this is clearly visible in the expansion of cities, the development of technologies, and the growth of trade.

The Renaissance was the first historical period that celebrated the creative ideal and transferred it from God to humans (unfortunately, women were still marginalized during this era). The spirit of this period blurred the boundary between the human and the divine. Key inventions like the printing press greatly expanded the ability to spread ideas and access new knowledge like never before. This era was marked by inventions and discoveries (for example, the discovery of the New World – America), the rise of modern capitalism fueled by trade and entrepreneurship, and the encouragement of individual thinking and hard work (for instance, through the Protestant Reformation). The Renaissance ensured the recognition of creators and that they were compensated for their services. Thus, creative products in art and other fields developed and flourished.

Many great creators, such as the renowned artist Leonardo da Vinci, lived during this period, and they were often polymaths—experts across multiple fields. The widely recognized concept of “genius” began to take shape precisely during this era. However, even during and

¹⁵ Mason, J. H. (2003). *The value of creativity: The origins and emergence of a modern belief*. Hampshire: Ashgate.

after the Renaissance, human creativity was often met with skepticism. This skepticism can be seen, for example, in the works of Shakespeare.¹⁶

Conclusion. A historical approach to creativity helps us to accurately assess events and to understand the roots of both old and new debates. This historical inquiry is not solely concerned with the past; it is also relevant and pressing for the present and the future. By studying history, we can comprehend where the field currently stands and the directions in which it is headed. There is a notion that history tends to repeat itself. Considering the rapidly expanding research in creativity today, a historical perspective assists us in distinguishing genuine scientific progress from the mere presentation of old ideas in new forms, often referred to as “old wine in new bottles.”

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