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Creative Genius

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Abstract: Major innovations in the arts and sciences can be largely attributed to the output of creative geniuses. But how do such great innovators emerge? And how does their creativity manifest itself? The first question shall be addressed by examining the early experiences that contribute to the development of extraordinary creative potential. The factors include family background, education, and professional training. The response to the second question concentrates on the typical career trajectory of illustrious creators. Features of this trajectory include the ages at which geniuses tend to produce their first great work, their best work, and their last great work.

Keywords: Age; Creativity; Genius; Creative potential; Career trajectories; Life-span development.

Introduction

The terms ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ are sometimes used interchangeably, and other times are considered to represent quite distinct phenomena. However, creativity involves the capacity to produce some idea or product that is both original and functional. By the same token, innovation involves the act of introducing something new. Hence, creative individuals are necessarily innovators, and their ideas or products can be considered innovations. However, sometimes researchers prefer to distinguish between the origination of a new idea and the dissemination or adoption of that idea by others. This distinction is especially useful when discussing technological change. It is one thing for an inventor to devise and patent a ‘better mousetrap’, but quite another for that mousetrap to become widely adopted in households or businesses. A person who adopts the new mousetrap is then called an ‘innovator’ even when he or she had absolutely nothing to do with its creation. However, this distinction between creators and innovators becomes much less tenable when we examine other domains of achievement in the arts and sciences. For example, when Albert Einstein applied Max Planck’s new quantum theory to explain the photoelectric effect, Einstein was acting as an innovator in the sense that he was adopting and disseminating a new theory. Yet Einstein’s innovation only has significance because it took the form of a creative product—a novel and successful treatment of a critical phenomenon. Indeed, so important was Einstein’s application that it earned him a Nobel Prize, just as Planck had received one for the original theory. Speaking more generally, innovation usually takes place when one creative product becomes the basis for another creative product. Hence, in this chapter I shall use creativity and innovation as essentially equivalent terms.

Creativity or innovation can be studied from several different perspectives. Some researchers investigate the phenomenon from the standpoint of the psychological processes that underlie the origination of a creative product or innovation (e.g. Kaufmann, 2003; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2003; Weisberg, 2003). Other investigators examine the characteristics of the products that emerge from these processes (e.g. Simonton, 1980c, 1986c; Sternberg, Pretz & Kaufman, 2003). Yet other researchers concentrate on the attributes of the person that enable him or her to engage those processes or generate those products. It is this...
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