

Social group may be key to fostering creativity

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Mozart.

(Phys.org) —Creativity and genius are commonly seen as attributes of an individual, but new research indicates the role played by the surrounding group may be just as important.

Shared group membership, or lack of it, motivates individuals to rise to particular creative challenges, says Professor Alex Haslam from the School of Psychology at The University of Queensland.

"Shared group membership provides a basis for

certain forms of originality to be recognised, or disregarded," said Dr Haslam, who collaborated with international colleagues on a paper published recently in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

"Our research supports the argument that geniuses and creative people are very much products of the groups and societies within which they are located."

Typically it is assumed that genius and creativity are the product of the exceptional genes and personality of the individual.

"We argue for a move away from the idea that creativity and genius are 'other-worldly'," Professor Haslam said.

Professor Haslam collaborated on the paper – "The Collective Origins of Valued Originality: A Social Identity Approach to Creativity" – with Dr Inma Adarves-Yorno from the University of Exeter as well as Professor Tom Postmes and Dr Lise Jans from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

"What people create, and how they create it, depends to a large extent on what those around them – those with whom they identify – are doing," Dr Adarves-Yorno said.

The argument is corroborated in a number of experimental studies the team has conducted over the past decade and which have been published in leading scientific journals.

The paper explores how creative individuals are often portrayed as mavericks who, freed from group constraint, can fly in the face of convention.

"This is typified by Steve Jobs' now-famous 2005 address to Stanford graduates in which he advised his audience: 'Don't be trapped by dogma – that is, living with the results of other people's thinking'," Dr

Haslam said.

However, the researchers argue that too great an emphasis on the notion of "breaking away" risks losing sight of what makes creativity meaningful.

Dr Postmes said even when an individual strove to "break away", the ways in which they did it were determined by the group.

"The Sex Pistols, for example, based their creativity on breaking convention and challenging 'the establishment'," Dr Postmes said.

"Yet punk only makes sense with reference to what it is breaking away from. You can't understand its creativity without reference to established thinking."

The role of the group, or community, is also highlighted in providing both the audience for creativity and the nurturing environment in which it can happen, the researchers argue.

"Creativity does not take place in a social or cultural vacuum," Professor Haslam said.

"Some might suggest we don't need to fund the Arts, or invest in Universities, because there will always be a handful of exceptionally creative people who can come up with good ideas when they are needed.

"But our research shows you can't just rely on creativity to spring from nowhere.

"Artists, writers and scientists often do their most creative work when collaborating with one or more people—with like-minded friends, colleagues and peers."

Dr Adarves-Yorno said the research findings show it is acceptance by the group – or rejection by the group – that ultimately determines the value of creativity.

"For the creativity of individual creators to be celebrated, and to make a difference in the world, it has to be enthusiastically embraced by others," she said.

"You need various forms of institution to create and value the kinds of products that [creative people](#) are going to generate."

Professor Haslam poses the question of whether, if Mozart were alive today, he would be writing symphonies.

"It's unlikely, and without a well-funded and publicly valorised group of classical musicians to nurture and encourage him, it's probably more likely that he'd be writing jingles for laundry detergent," he said.

An important finding from the research was that in order to get the best out of creative individuals, society needed to invest in the groups that made certain forms of [creativity](#) possible.

"Even Steve Jobs needed a group to treat his ideas seriously and to cultivate them," Professor Haslam said.

"Indeed, it was precisely because people refused to be 'trapped by the dogma of another person's thinking', that Jobs' idea of the personal computer was initially dismissed as lunacy."

Provided by University of Queensland

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