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Types of Creativity and Types of Collaborative Circles: New Directions for Research

by Michael Farrell

> Nowadays everyone agrees that van Gogh's paintings show that he was a very creative artist. It is also fashionable to sneer at the ignorant bourgeoisie of his period for failing to recognize van Gogh's genius (…) But we should recognize that a hundred years ago those canvases were just the hallucinatory original works of a sociopathic recluse. They became creative only after a number of other artists, critics, and collectors interpreted them in terms of new aesthetic criteria and transformed them from substandard efforts into masterpieces.
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> [Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p. 321]

Introduction

In conceptualizing the Frankfurt School as collaborative circle [Farrell 2001] and Fromm's role in the circle as a scapegoat, Neil McLaughlin raises a number of questions about the dynamics of that circle and about the general theory of collaborative circles. Rather than respond to all the questions he raises, I have chosen to respond to three: the incompleteness of his analysis of Fromm's role in the circle; the need to expand the theory of circles to include the fields in which they develop [Bourdieu 1996; Collins 1998]; and the need to differentiate between creativity and prestige when assessing the degree of "success" of a circle or an individual member of a circle.

The Frankfurt School as a collaborative circle

McLaughlin has presented a convincing case that the core members of the Frankfurt School were a collaborative circle. They fit the general pattern in many ways: a set of highly ambitious young people, roughly of similar ages are drawn to a magnet place where they discover their similarities in background, interests and aspirations. For various reasons they all feel relatively marginalized, cut off from well-placed mentors and straightforward career paths. Through the initial efforts of gate-

keepers, individuals are drawn into a larger cohesive group centered on a charismatic leader. Inspired by him and by each other, they meet regularly and share their critiques of current theorizing about the social and political world. Their commitment to the group escalates until this small community of friends becomes the center of their creative work; and they alternate between working alone, collaborating in pairs, and meeting as group to share their work in progress. Through repeated rounds of this kind of interaction they develop a shared vision that guides their work for a large portion of their careers.

During the quest stage, when they are arguing about what should and should not be part of their shared vision, some members seem to go too far, proposing ideas that go beyond what the others see as acceptable; others seem to lag behind, adhering to traditional ways of thinking. The dialogue between these boundary markers and a central coalition of less extreme members provides the stimulation for sharpening and clarifying the shared vision. Eventually, this relatively cohesive stage of group development is followed by a stage of collective action in which the members carry out a set of projects that require interdependence. Some members take on more of the day to day work of organizing and managing group projects, perhaps coming to see themselves as the workhorses. Some receive more recognition than others. As the conflict mounts, some members begin to individuate, breaking free of both the shared group culture and their roles in the group. For most all members, the demands of family and career begin to take priority over their commitment to the group. These centrifugal forces overwhelm the abilities of the peacemakers to hold the group together, and it fragments into dyads and isolated individuals. In the later stages of their careers, divisions that occurred during the group's development color the attempts to reunite the members and construct a history of the group.

Despite how well the Frankfurt school fits the model, as McLaughlin points out, like all individual cases there are ways that this one deviates from the common pattern. Anomalies often suggest ways in which a theory needs to be modified, and rightfully, McLaughlin uses them as a springboard to suggest ways to clarify and extend the theory. One of the questions that stimulated his inquiry is, how can we account for the fact that Eric Fromm, a central member of the early circle and one of the most creative thinkers of the group, came to be "marginalized in the academy and among intellectuals despite the fact that similar ideas to the ones he articulated and developed seem to retain (…) widespread interest?" In answering this question, McLaughlin outlines his previous interpretation of how Fromm came to be marginalized by the group: his humanistic theory of interpersonal relations, his emotional independence from Horkheimer, and his relative independence from what might be called the "political economy" of the Institute itself. However, in his current paper

McLaughlin examines how the dynamics of the collaborative circle in the quest stage, when they were constructing their shared vision and defining the boundaries of the group culture, set in motion Fromm's alienation from the group, and may have culminated in his becoming a "forgotten intellectual."

Small groups, such as collaborative circles, float at the "meso" level of social life, and they are often ignored by sociologists who theorize at the macro level of class, culture, and social movements, as well as by those who theorize at the micro level of the individual. In sociology, over the past century theorists have gone through cycles of neglecting and rediscovering small groups. Even network theorists, whom one might think would have much to say about dense primary groups, seem more interested in network composition, dyadic support relations, "weak ties," and bridges of structural holes, rather than the dynamics within the dense network of a small group. It is gratifying when someone suggests that the dynamics within a circle may have set in motion creative processes that culminated in the partitioning of a major theoretical movement. Nevertheless, I think McLaughlin has opened a question that goes beyond the internal dynamics of the collaborative circle. His analysis suggests that it would be fruitful to move beyond mapping out the processes that occur within collaborative circles and begin to map out the ways in which circles and circle members are received within a larger field [Bourdieu 1996; Collins 1998; Csikszentmihalyi 1999].

Fromm was a boundary marker in the discussions during the quest stage of the circle's development. Perhaps, as McLaughlin suggests, his expertise in psychoanalysis as well as humanistic scholarship shaded his interpretation of the emerging vision, and eventually Adorno, Horkheimer and others came to the conclusion that he had a "soft" view of both Freudian theory and Marx's critique of capitalism. Yet, many circles develop this kind of polarization and eventually reintegrate the dissident members. For example, Cezanne was marginalized by the Impressionists during the quest stage. Several of the group members saw his work as unruly, rebellious studio painting, out of sync with the emerging Impressionist culture. As they moved into the collective action stage, they did not want his work to be seen alongside theirs in group exhibitions. Yet he was eventually reintegrated into the group, largely through the efforts of Pissarro, the peacemaker. Other boundary testers have followed a similar course, notably Alan Tate in the Fugitive Poets' circle, and Lucy Stone in the Nineteenth century women's movement. How do we account for the fact that Fromm's position as a boundary marker ultimately became permanent, and that the ritual of attacking and belittling his work became institutionalized, not only among the group members, but in the larger networks that surrounded the circle, such as the New Left and the psychoanalytic community?

It seems to me that to answer this question we need to look at the fields in which the circle developed. A field consists of a set of centers, each with its own intellectual identity, gatekeepers, traditions, and career. Collins [1998] proposes that in philosophy there are never more than six positions in a field. When the Frankfurt group set out to conceptualize European society with an integration of Marxian and Freudian theories, each of these theories already occupied positions in the field of social theory. McLaughlin suggests that in the 1930s these theory groups were more like scientific/intellectual movements or SIMs [Frickel and Gross 2005] than established theoretical schools; nevertheless, they were more or less cohesive positions, each with their own emerging canon. The members of the Frankfurt circle seemed to have struggled to integrate the two theories while retaining the most orthodox versions of each. Fromm seemed less constrained by this group norm. Drawing from the early Marx and his background in humanism and sociology, he focused his thinking on the adaptations to alienation and the therapeutic potential of interpersonal relationships. In developing his unique synthesis, his thinking expanded beyond the positions of the existing theoretical camps. Like Herman Melville in his middle years when he wrote *Moby Dick* [Fine 2001], Fromm overshot the positions in the field that supported the thinking of his circle. Eventually neither the Marxists nor the Freudians would claim him. He became the embodiment of the "sins" that the Frankfurt circle strove to avoid, the group scapegoat, no longer on the boundary but outside the group. Within the group, Adorno became the lightening rod, identifying incidences of Fromm's corruption and expressing the shared indignation of the group. Many of us who are old enough can remember that, even among those who were discovering Marcuse and Habermas in the 1960s, it was common to cite Fromm as someone who had developed an Americanized version of Freud and Marx, one that abandoned the fundamental principles of instinct theory, the Oedipal conflict, and the structural basis of class conflict. The scapegoating of Fromm may have begun in the quest stage of the Frankfurt circle, and it may have gotten amplified during the individuation stage, but it was cemented in by the reception and interpretation he received in the larger field.

Scapegoating is a nasty business. As McLaughlin suggests, often someone who seems undeserving is singled out for attack. The attacks often tell more about the fears of the group members than the behavior of the scapegoat. What McLaughlin does not discuss is why Fromm was scapegoated both by the group members and by the theoretical camps within the larger field? What did he represent? How was his image used by the group? In his analysis of Anne Hutchinson's role as deviant scapegoat in the Puritan community, Kai Erikson [1966] argues that the migration from England to the American colony and subsequent transformation from marginalized sect to

hegemonic religion generated a community-wide identity crisis for the Puritans. Anne Hutchison, questioning authorities like a respectable Old World Puritan, was placed on trial and became the foil against which the New World community redefined what it meant to be a good Puritan. As a scapegoat who embodied ways of thinking and acting that other members of the community still adhered to, she was a threat to the community. How did the Frankfurt school use Fromm? Did the move to Columbia University amplify the scapegoating? In what ways did scapegoating him reduce the anxieties or internal conflicts that haunted the Frankfurt school, and perhaps still haunt the critical theorists and orthodox Freudians, especially in the American context? Were the other members tempted by the route that Fromm took, and did they have to ritualistically renounce it? McLaughlin leaves such questions unanswered.

Context of Circle Development

Beyond the role that Fromm played for the Frankfurt circle, McLaughlin's analysis of the Frankfurt circle suggests future directions for research. The Frankfurt circle was founded as an institute with an academic-like structure. Although the institute may have been more of a think-tank than an academic department, it did have a hierarchical structure, a budget, and tenured lines; and the sojourn of the institute at Columbia University meant they had to win legitimacy and compete for resources in a politically charged university environment. The theory of collaborative circles deals mainly with the internal dynamics of peer friendship groups that form within a discipline but outside of such structured settings. How does a formal structure with hierarchical positions alter the dynamics of a circle? Did the hierarchical status differences within the Frankfurt circle create a drag on group development? For example, did Horkhiemer's authority reinforce his dominant position and perhaps undermine the spontaneous shift in leadership from Horkheimer to Fromm that could have taken place during the quest stage? Did competition for resources controlled by Horkheimer contribute to Adorno's sense of rivalry with Fromm? Did the rivalry undermine efforts to reintegrate Fromm into the group? Although we cannot answer these kinds of questions by studies of single cases, McLaughlin has made clear that such questions need to be asked. We need to examine the life course of circles that form both inside and outside of structured, academic settings. Given the efforts by universities and funding agencies to stimulate interdisciplinary circles in academia, it is particularly timely that we examine the conditions that block or facilitate circle development in academia.

It may be possible to make progress in understanding how the environment of a circle alters its internal dynamics and life course by doing systemic comparative analysis of cases that form in different types of environments. How does the interaction in academic collaborative circles differ from interaction in those that form in less structured, more informal environments? How does the development of scientific circles differ from the development of circles in the arts? Within the academic environment, it may be possible to make advances in theorizing by comparing the dynamics of circles formed by higher status, tenured faculty to those formed by less well established junior faculty; and to those consisting of senior mentors and junior protégés.

Frickel and Gross [2005] suggest that higher status, tenured faculty are more likely than junior faculty to act on their "grievances" with a discipline and form collaborative circles that challenge the central intellectual tendencies in their field. However, it is an empirical question as to which types of circles are likely to be more creative and more successful: those composed of senior, junior, or mixed ranks. While I am sure some high status, tenured faculty sometimes form circles that are creative, my own research suggests that collaboration that includes instrumental intimacy and revolutionary creativity is more likely to occur among less well established peers. When the members begin to achieve higher status, these collaborative circles tend to disband. My findings also suggest that, because junior, more marginalized members have less to lose in terms of reputation and status and more to gain by joining together, and because they are less likely to have invested their careers in existing paradigms, they are more likely to question the dominant paradigms in their fields, and ultimately more likely to introduce revolutionary visions in a field. Their junior status also seems more conducive to the trusting, open communication that is a precondition of instrumental intimacy.

Measuring Success in Collaborative Circles

As we do research on the relative success of different types of circles, there are a few things I think it is important to keep in mind. First, in the literature on innovation, there is a simmering argument about what is meant by success. Some focus on creative work itself, the kind that van Gogh did when he worked alone in Arles, supported mainly by his steady correspondence with his brother, Theo, knocking out painting after painting, creating a new type of art that went beyond anything done by the Impressionists or even the work of his ambivalent collaborator, Paul Gauguin. The theory of collaborative circles is largely about the kind of success Van Gogh

experienced when he discovered his original style or "voice." As he went through this process, his interaction with Theo, carried out largely by correspondence, had many of the elements of instrumental intimacy found in collaborative circles: sharing his wildest ideas with an idealized, trusted, and empathetic friend. Embedded in this relationship, van Gogh forged a new way of painting. This is one form of success. However, several theorists focus on another type of success, the kind that comes as an outcome of the collective action stage of circle development. In this stage, the circle attempts to win recognition for the vision that has emerged during the quest and creative work stages. In the quote at the beginning of this article, Csikszentmihalyi proposes that creativity has not really occurred until an innovation is recognized in a field. For him, creativity with a capital "C" occurs only when it is recognized as an innovation by those at the center of a field. It is the old question: if a tree falls in the wilderness and there is no one there to hear it, does it still make a sound? I think it does. Like Frickel and Gross [2005, Csikszentmihalyi is proposing that ultimately we measure success by prestige or recognition by those in our field. I don't think this argument is settled yet, but I do think it should be taken into account when examining the outcomes from different types of circles. Whenever possible we should measure both kinds of success, and we should differentiate the types of group dynamics associated with each type of success.

It may well be that higher status academics who form circles are more likely to be successful in winning acceptance for a vision, but it remains to be seen whether they are more likely to introduce innovative visions in a field. McLaughlin's paper suggests that Fromm had a great deal of success when it came to doing creative work. Where he did not succeed is in winning wide spread validation of the significance of his work by those who were the gatekeepers in his field. To me, explaining the social processes that lead to this latter kind of success is less interesting than understanding the interactions that lead to creative work. Success at the recognition stage is subject to all the political vicissitudes of building and maintaining a reputation. Gary Allan Fine's study of the rise and fall and resurrection of reputations suggests that Fromm may yet be rediscovered and his work redefined as successful according to the criterion of prestige, but success or failure by that criterion does not alter what he accomplished when he wrote *Escape From Freedom, The Art of Loving*, and other creative works.

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Abstract: This paper combines historical and biographical work on the Frankfurt School of critical theorists with a sociological approach to intellectual creativity outlined in Michael Farrell's provocative book *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*. Revisiting earlier research on the often unheralded role the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm played in the early years of the critical theory tradition, the paper reviews the theory of collaborative circles outlined by Farrell, applies this social science explanation of conflict and creativity to the Frankfurt School network of Horkheimer, Fromm, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal etc. and suggests a new way of thinking about the history of this innovative and controversial group of social theorists and researchers. The paper concludes by suggesting revisions to the Farrell model of collaborative circles and compares and contrasts the strengths of the theory to the "scientific intellectual movements" approach outlined by Frickel and Gross.

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