

In Response

Defining Creativity

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Creativity, my dictionary tells me, is the "ability to create." So much for dictionaries.

Can we, as behavior analysts, provide a better definition? Sloane, Endo, and Della-Piana (1980) believe so. "Definition of variables," they write, "is an important step in studying phenomena, and defining creativity is a matter of determining what is discriminative for tacting something as creative" (p. 11). Behavior is labeled creative, according to the authors, not based on form alone, but when "stimuli or stimulus relationships [suggest] informal control of a response or response product" (p. 20). By "informal" the authors mean multiply determined; control is said to be "formal" when only one variable is involved.¹

But multiple causation does not make behavior creative, as the authors acknowledge in the end of their paper. Most behavior is multiply determined, but very little is "creative." My writing at this moment is under the control of the authors' paper, various books and manuscripts I have in front of me, and the temperature (hot) in my office; it is not particularly creative.

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¹This distinction is a departure from the formal/thematic distinction Skinner (1957) proposed. He and others have restricted the term "formal" to relations in which there is a point-to-point correspondence between stimulus and response, as in dictation and transcription, or echoic and textual behavior. When point-to-point correspondence is lacking, control is said to be "thematic," as in tacts and intraverbals. The authors of "Creative Behavior" use "formal" in a manner that embraces both categories.

Furthermore, I suggest that we are more likely to call behavior "creative" when its controlling variables (no matter what their number) are *unknown*. Dali took advantage of hypnagogic states for the designs of many paintings; how are we to characterize the controlling variables? A product alone is often sufficiently interesting and original to be judged creative (consider works of Escher or Jackson Pollock, or the theory of relativity). We speak, in general, of a creator when we can't otherwise explain the thing created. To paraphrase Samuel Butler, creativity is only a term for man's ignorance of the gods.

The very task of definition is suspect. The language of creativity is used in different ways by different people and differently from one generation to the next. "Creativity" is a natural category and as such is imprecise, no matter what the dictionaries say. It is not necessarily a good category for scientific analysis.

Defining a natural category is a thankless if not impossible task and in fact unnecessary for a functional analysis of behavior. On the other hand, when we can agree that someone has behaved "creatively," it may be useful to determine the controlling variables. Concomitantly, we should strive to develop a technology to produce interesting and useful variations in behavior. This can be done without defining creativity.

References

- Skinner, B. F. *Verbal behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957.
- Sloane, H. N., Endo, G. T., and Della-Piana, G. Creative behavior. *The Behavior Analyst*, 1980, 3, 11-22.