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# PSYCH MATTERS

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## Motivation, Risk Taking and Creative Achievement

Dr. Cindy Sifonis

I have been studying the processes underlying creativity for over ten years now. Though my interest in creativity started before graduate school, it was in graduate school that I received most of my training in the area of creative cognition. This approach to studying creativity is rather egalitarian in that it assumes that there is nothing particularly special about creative thinking. It involves normal cognitive processes (e.g., memory retrieval, analogy, visualization) operating on normal knowledge structures. In fact, all of us are capable of being creative and engage in creative thinking on a regular basis. Every time you find yourself in a novel situation, you are forced to generate a novel plan of action to deal with it. Did you leave your homework assignment on the desk at home? Now you have to figure out a way to get it to the professor on time. Do you have to make dinner and all you have in the fridge are three limp carrots, some left-over pasta, and hamburger meat? You now have to figure out how to make an edible meal from those ingredients. Quite simply, without the ability to generate solutions to novel problems, we would be ill equipped to face the curve balls that life is always throwing at us.

Now I don't know about you, but I find this approach to creativity to be rather refreshing. This approach leads to the proposal that every one of us has the ability to be creative should we wish it. This is in stark contrast to the traditional way of conceptualizing creativity. Typically, researchers assumed there was something

special about the creative individual. It was thought that they used different cognitive processes or had some special abilities denied to the rest of us. However, as more and more data accumulates, we find that this is not the case. People with a lifetime of creative achievements to their credit appear to think and process information in the same fashion as those who achieve less. This results in a seeming paradox. If everybody appears to process information similarly, why the discrepancies between individuals in their levels of creative achievement? These discrepancies appear to be due to two factors - motivation and risk taking. Those exhibiting high levels of creative achievement are more motivated and more willing to take risks than individuals who achieve less.

Simonton (1997) has investigated the determinants of creativity and genius for over 20 years and has provided ample evidence that success is highly correlated with productivity. The most successful individuals in a field (the upper 10%) tend to produce about 50% of all contributions in the field. In fact, one of the best predictors of eventual success in scientific disciplines such as psychology is the number of publications an individual has before they receive their doctorate (Simonton, 1997). This is a finding that has held across many studies and a variety of disciplines. Why are high achievers so motivated? At least one potential explanation is that they love what they do. They find their field inherently interesting and, consequently, enjoy their work. They also enjoy exploring and pushing the boundaries of their field.

Essentially, high achievers are intrinsically motivated. They don't publish, contribute, and explore the boundaries of their field because they are paid well to do their jobs or because they like the security of medical insurance and a regular paycheck (all of which are examples of extrinsic motivation). They do these things for the inherent pleasure it brings them. Satisfying their curiosity, creating something new, or knowing they pushed themselves to the limits of their capabilities is reward enough.

Another interesting characteristic of high achievers is the quality of the work they produce. It would be easy to believe that every work of a creative genius is a work of art. However, this is not the case. Even though high achievers produce many works of value during their lifetimes, they produce an equal number of forgettable works. This indiscriminant productivity is related to the second quality typical of most creative individuals - the willingness to take risks. Creative individuals take chances. They acknowledge the possibility that they might make a mistake but make an attempt anyway.

Dunbar (1997) has noted the importance of risk-taking in scientific discovery. He has been going into the field and observing the creative thinking of molecular biologists in several successful research labs across the country. In Dunbar's sample, there was variability across labs in their ability to achieve creative insights. However, the cognitive processes involved in scientific thinking did not vary across labs. *(continued on page 6)*

### Inside Matters

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## Chair Matters



...and on my planet we....

In Psychology classes we often talk about normative and non-normative behaviors or of the ranges of behavior that can be observed when we study people. Norms are funny things, and they probably should not be trusted too much unless we can be certain about the identity of the population they describe. Local norms, descriptions of the range of behaviors within a carefully defined set of people, are often more defensible. Throughout the past month I have been thinking about local norms a great deal, and I'd like to share some of my observations.

OU is a growing regional university with a student body composed largely of commuter students. I was never a commuter student, so I have no idea what it is like to live at home, work full time at a job, and try to carry a full course load. Working full time and taking classes full time suggests that there is very little time to do other things such as sleeping or studying. This would suggest my expectation that students read their textbooks, study the material, do the assigned homework, and come to class prepared to talk about the material is somehow inappropriate or absolutely impossible. Last week I overheard two students in the Rec Center locker room talking about professors. One of them commented, "That Stewart guy, he actually expects you to read the textbook before every class. Where does he come from?" "Obviously, another planet" was my reply.

A faculty member came into my office last week complaining that she was having a great deal of difficulty getting students to be responsive in class. She had prepared what sounded (to me at least) like a great lecture that included a demonstration that should have elicited at least questions and comments if not immediate insight. Instead she told me that two people were obviously asleep and missed the demonstration and one apparently was listening to something else on headphones. She described most as looking bored and put off by her questions, and told me that one student said "You don't understand lady, this is Oakland University and here we don't ask questions or make comments. Here we expect you to teach." To be honest with you, we both laughed over the "lady" piece. At least she could be addressed as Professor Lady or Dr. Lady.

A second faculty member came in seeking advice about student motivation. She, like many Psychology faculty, has "raised the bar" in her classroom and is expecting students to do more than just take multiple-choice tests in order to get a grade. The problem she says is that many students still have not developed the skills necessary to write quality essays or term papers. When she checked the Undergraduate Catalog she noted that anyone enrolled in a 300-level course should have already demonstrated writing proficiency (passing RHT 160 with a grade of 2.0 or better), so her expectations were that the writing assignment would not be too taxing. She asked the class about this requirement and not a single student indicated that they were even aware of it, and many had not taken RHT 160. Her suggestion that students might visit the Writing/Reading Assistance Program (WRAP) where any OU student can go to get assistance to improve their writing and reading was followed by what she described as a sincere question about how much extra credit they would receive for doing so. first place. Do you see what I mean about norms being funny things?

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# Advising Matters



## On Being a Psychology Major

**W**hat does it mean to be a Psychology Major at Oakland University? What does it take? I would like to believe that these are two very important questions to ask yourself, whether you have already declared yourself as a major or whether you are thinking about becoming a major. I'll take a moment (or a few lines) to describe differing possibilities. First, you must declare yourself a major. Please complete the "Declaring a Major" form which you can obtain from Lori (Rm 130, Pryale Hall), the advising office (Rm 112, Pryale Hall), or on the wall just as you enter Pryale Hall. Please declare yourself a major of psychology as soon as you know that Psychology is the degree you wish to pursue. Second, ask yourself how might you add to the program and what you wish to experience as part of the program. Psychology, as a major, provides you with diverse career opportunities. You could go into business, clinical, experimental, social, or quantitative psychology! All of these sub-areas have very different characteristics in terms of their career options; yet have the communality of focusing on human thought and behavior. So, get involved; join the Psychology Club. Learn to take initiative toward finding how you might apply your major to a career; volunteer or work in a setting related to your interest area. Discover where you might find helpful and useful information (a possibility: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org), the American Psychological Association website). Third, recognize the skills required for being a psychology major, namely, writing skills and mathematical and/or statistical skills. Those two skill sets form the foundation of the field, whether you get a job or go to graduate school. As part of developing skills, GET INVOLVED in research! It is paramount that you understand the process of science of psychology. Moreover, it gives you the opportunity to know your professors and allow them to know you. Fourth, introduce yourself to your academic advisor. You will find a list composed of you and your fellow psychology majors next to Rm. 112, Pryale Hall. Next to your name will be your faculty advisor. Introduce yourself and get to know your advisor. She or he can assist you with your schedule and answer questions you might have about being a psychology major. So look into it, Good Luck! ♦  
Dr. Eberly

### Still undecided in your future career in Psychology?

Check out these websites. You can match your interests and skills to a career in the field, discover what jobs are open to you with what degrees, and get information about possible interest areas!

[www.wku.edu/~kuhlenschmidt/psycareer/index.htm](http://www.wku.edu/~kuhlenschmidt/psycareer/index.htm)

[www.uga.edu/psychology/undergraduate/careers.html](http://www.uga.edu/psychology/undergraduate/careers.html)

[www.psychsociety.com.au/study/careers/default.asp](http://www.psychsociety.com.au/study/careers/default.asp)

HAVE FUN!

# Psi Chi Matters

## Come and Visit Psi Chi/Psychology Club!

Psi Chi/Psychology Club events are open to everyone! If you do not meet the Psi Chi requirements, you can still be a member of Psychology Club. This includes all meetings, activities, charity events, and other forms of full participation in our organization. There does not have to be a formal commitment and your involvement can be as much as you would like. (Hopefully Alot!)

A seminar is a public presentation where professionals in a field share their expertise with others. The following seminars have been arranged by Psi Chi/Psychology Club to offer OU students an opportunity to learn more about cutting edge discoveries in Psychology. Seminars are a very important source of information that supplement information presented in traditional classroom settings. Our speakers are recognized researchers in their field and are often asked to travel to outside destinations to share their important findings with others. We hope you will take advantage of these wonderful opportunities to increase your knowledge about psychology.

### Meetings and speakers for the remainder of the semester:

- |  |                 |               |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| <b>Tuesday November 12</b>   | General Meeting | 12:00-12:45pm |
| <b>Wednesday November 20</b>   | Seminar         | 6:30-8:00pm   |
| Dr. Robby Stewart, Professor at Oakland University, Department Chair. "Assessing Attachment Styles in Adulthood" Professor Stewart will provide a brief summary of attachment theory and will discuss a number of the instruments commonly used to assess attachment style in adults.  |                 |               |
| <b>Tuesday November 26</b>   | Guest Speaker   | 12:00-12:45pm |
| Eric Klisz, "Industrial/Organizational Psychology" Eric will administer a Life Styles Inventory to assess your beliefs, values, behaviors, and assumptions, which influence one's career, health, relationships, and well-being.   |                 |               |
| <b>Tuesday December 3</b>  | Seminar*        | 6:00-7:30pm   |
| Dr. Sylvie Lombardo, Professor at Oakland University. Dr. Lombardo will be speaking about "Clinical and Community Psychology". Dr. Lombardo will share her research experience in the field, and the importance of prevention programs with youth. A focus on prevention of problem behaviors such as risky sex, drug and alcohol use, school dropout, and violence. |                 |               |
| <b>Tuesday December 10</b>   | General Meeting | 12:00-12:45pm |

All meetings will be held in Lake Superior A, downstairs of the Oakland Center, across from the bookstore.  
\*This seminar will be held in Lake Superior B.

# Chair Comment

*(continued from page 2)*

Now remember I come from another planet, so I cannot be expected to understand this question. A faculty member includes a writing requirement in her course and its presence creates the awareness that a student has a deficiency in this area. Rather than address and rectify the deficiency the student in question wants to know about extra credit they can earn for becoming the type of student the faculty member expected to have in the first place. Do you see what I mean about norms being funny things?

Finally, I'd like to tell you about two students who came by my office. The first was Karen Hill, and her enthusiasm about learning was so vibrant that she immediately agreed to put her comments into a "Student Matters" article for this newsletter. I strongly encourage you to see her piece on the difference between hoping and dreaming. It is evident to me that Karen truly desires to be successful, and I have no doubts that this energy, drive and passion will enable her to accomplish this goal. The second student wanted to know what the difference was between a brown bag research meeting and a seminar. He had seen websites at Wayne State and the University of Michigan announcing both brown bag research meetings [a lunch meeting where a professor or grad student presents their current research to a local audience] and formal seminars [invited addresses where faculty present their latest research findings or interests]. He plans to attend events such as these at WSU and UM in the future, and will be working to get more students to attend similar events when they are held at OU. It is interesting to note that he did not raise the question of extra credit. Perhaps he and Karen are from my planet.

The bottom line is this- attending college is more than sitting in a class, taking multiple-choice tests, and getting a degree. It is about learning. I am not the only faculty person in Pryale Hall who is from another planet. We are all enthusiastic about learning - it is our life's work. We want our classes to be exciting and interesting, and we want to find students who will get excited about the things we find so interesting. We read psychology and other things without having assignments to do so. Sure, we get frustrated with those who would rather chase after grades than work toward understanding the material (on my planet we call this getting a degree rather than an education), those who expect to write a "good enuff" paper on the first draft (on my planet we write 2 or 3 drafts before we share a manuscript, and then we re-write 2 or 3 more times), those who refuse to ask questions (on my planet we have high respect for people who have developed the skill of asking good questions and for those who have the humility to recognize that they do not understand everything), those who skip or sleep through too many classes (on my planet cutting class is a terrible sin), or those who thinking of learning as a passive activity where a good teacher merely gives you things to spit back later on a test (the people on my planet simply do not understand this behavior).

So, what do we do to get past the frustration? We vent to each other; I get to vent a little in this column. And then we remember that there are a few really dedicated students in each of our classes, and we regroup and work to get them charged up and enthusiastic about learning - learning for its own sake; learning for the simple joy of knowing. We invite these special students to come to our planet for awhile; some stay forever. College is not merely a continuation of high school; it is serious (and expensive) preparation for the rest of your life. ♦

Robby

## **The Psychology Department with Psi Chi/Psychology Club Presents: CAREERS IN PSYCHOLOGY WORKSHOP**

- The Careers in Psychology Workshop will be held on Saturday November 2nd.
- There will be a detailed presentation of many possible career paths for Psychology majors at different levels of education. Come and discover YOUR options customized to YOUR abilities.
- The cost is \$6, and you need to register with Sandy in 111Prayle Hall, (248)370-2301
- Don't miss out! This happens only once a year and very valuable information will be presented.

# Department Matters

(continued from page 1)

What varied was the scientists' willingness to take risks - their willingness to try a new procedure, examine an unexplained phenomenon, or propose a wild new theory to explain the data. Those taking the risks were the same ones pushing the envelope of what was known in new directions. Many times, these scientists were wrong. However, the times they were correct compensated for those mistakes.

Do you find this knowledge to be inspiring? I do. What this means is that I have a large degree of control over my creative achievements. If creativity was wholly determined by a special cognitive process or by possessing the perfect combination of genes, then I would either be creative or I would not. I would achieve or I would not. The choice would not be up to me. It would be determined by chance. However, if creative achievement depends critically on levels of motivation and willingness to take risks, then I can achieve to whatever degree I choose.

This is not to say that changing behaviors that depend very much on personality variables will be easy or obvious. For example, how exactly does someone become more motivated? How does a person learn to take risks if they find the uncertainty associated with risk-taking to be terrifying? Fortunately, there are a few techniques available for overcoming these problems. One technique for increasing motivation involves identifying what you find to be interesting and integrating that interest into your work as much as possible. A technique to increase tolerance for risk is to practice risk-taking in relatively safe environments and gradually increase the size of the risks taken in those environments.

As you go through your normal routine try to become aware of those things that really interest you. Is it a specific television program? Is it an area of research you examined in your social psychology class? Is it the time you get to spend with your young nieces and nephews? When you identify your interests, spend some time thinking about why you find those things interesting. Perhaps you like spending time with your 5-year-old nephew because of the interesting social behavior questions he is always asking. You find his questions illustrate the degree to which much of our social behavior hinges on societal conventions. For example, your nephew actively questions the need for facing the door in an elevator. Perhaps you also notice that you found the research examining social conventions you discussed in your social psychology class to be fascinating. If this is the case, try to find ways of exploring this interest. If you are taking a cognitive psychology class, question how cognitive processes such as memory retrieval or pattern recognition affect our behavior in social settings. If you are taking a creative writing class, perhaps you can find ways of exploring the issue of societal conventions in your writing. In short, become aware of what you find interesting and creatively explore methods for integrating and addressing that interest in as many facets of your work and academic life as possible (Keller, 1987; Sass, 1989). You will be amazed at how much easier it is to be motivated if you can accomplish this goal.

Making successive approximations is an excellent technique for enhancing the ability to take risks. Start small and start in a safe environment. Believe it or not, school is a relatively safe environment. The mistakes you make in school are much less likely to have severe consequences to those you make on the job. For example, if you have a question about a point made in lecture, make an effort to ask the professor after class. This is fairly safe. It is the rare professor who ridicules a student asking for clarification of a point made during the lecture. Practice asking questions after class until doing so no longer provokes fearfulness or anxiety. The next step is to ask those questions during class. Once again, practice this until it is no longer stressful for you. Next, you might try voicing what you know will be perceived as a position contrary to the professors on a small writing assignment. If you have success, work up to doing the same on more important projects. Eventually, you will reach the point where it is possible for you to publicly make important, yet risky decisions or statements. This does not mean that all of your efforts will be well received. I can not tell you the number of times I regretted making a particular statement or engaging in a particular course of action. However, the times in which the risks pay off should far outweigh the times risk-taking was a liability (given you put careful thought into the decisions you make). I have found that even when there are unpleasant consequences to a particular decision I have made, the lessons I have learned from that mistake are extremely valuable. Once again, school is a good place to practice these techniques. By the time you embark upon a career you will have learned a lot about your capabilities and the correct way to go about making risky decisions.

Life is an adventure and, as far as we know, it is the only one we have. Use it to achieve all that you are capable of achieving, and experience all that you are capable of experiencing. Above all, learn to have fun with it. ♦

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# Student Comment

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## On Hoping and Desiring by Karen Hill

I read the most inspiring article in The Oakland Press a few weeks ago in which a very interesting comparison was described by Jim Pawlak concerning the difference between hope and desire. Pawlak was summarizing the "how to" messages in Think and Grow Rich, a book by Napoleon Hill that was published in 1937. Before you roll your eyes and say "1937, that was a long time ago." consider that Hill based his book on interviews with Alexander Graham Bell, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, King Gillette, John D. Rockefeller, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, F. W. Woolworth, and others. It is no understatement to conclude that virtually every self-improvement book on the shelves today parrots what Hill wrote long ago.

Now I must tell you that ever since I read this analogy, I haven't been able to stop thinking about the implications of this hope vs. desire theory. It basically says that if you are motivated to pursue your goals based on a true desire to achieve, then success will almost inevitably be yours for the asking. Those people who are driven with sincere desire will accurately identify their goal, develop a strategy, and continue on until the ultimate result has been captured. The rewards for the extra effort are guaranteed to be far -reaching and long -lasting.

On the other hand, if you repeatedly catch yourself talking about doing something, but never actually taking any action to get it done, then the chances are quite high that you are betting on hope to fuel your motivations. This is so dangerous, because so many people only allow themselves to daydream about their future, sometimes without even realizing it is happening. I suppose it might satisfy some that are content just being able to " talk" about a significant aspiration. But wouldn't it feel much more rewarding if the ultimate in results came your way? Wouldn't you love to know that you are, in fact, quite capable of achieving much more than you give yourself credit for?

I will admit that being a non-traditional student and having had the benefit of already completing one chapter of my academic career, it's easier for me to appreciate all of the opportunities available to each student at Oakland University. I've already gone through a four-year program, graduated, gone into the work force, and come back for yet another major. Looking back on how I tackled my first degree, I just cringe sometimes when I think about how sloppy my approach was to formulating my own future. Missed opportunities and lack of motivation contaminate plans all the time. I wonder why any student would go through all of the hassles of getting themselves into any university, only to sign themselves up for failure. It doesn't have to be a painful experience. Just the opposite should be true. Allowing yourself to express your true desires in the productive and nurturing atmosphere of a university will lead to a realized goal to be proud of by all. Professors, advisors, family, and even friends are all encouraging you to be your best. But it's up to you to provide the self-discipline and devotion needed to attain that goal. Don't rely on hope as the sole source of your future accomplishments. IT'S YOUR FUTURE! Don't count on luck to get you where you want to go. Banking on a deep sense of desire will keep you focused and energized to reach beyond your limitations as you've never done before. Experiment with new ideas and situations, allow yourself to make mistakes, and most importantly, applaud yourself for being the best you can be. ♦

# PSYCH MATTERS

Postage

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