Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

AN EVOLVING FIELD

Highly Inventive Explorer of Creativity:
An Interview with John Baer

Suzanna E. Henshon

Dr. John Baer is a Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Rider University. He earned his BA from Yale University (double major, psychology and Japanese studies, magna cum laude) and his PhD in cognitive and developmental psychology from Rutgers University.

Dr. Baer has published 10 books and scores of research articles and book chapters on creativity, cooperative learning, and other educational psychology topics. His research on the development of creativity and his teaching have both won national awards, including the American Psychological Association's Berlyne Prize for research on the Psychology of Creativity and the Arts and the National Conference on College Teaching and Learning's Award for Innovative Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Technology. His books include *Creativity and Divergent Thinking: A Task-Specific Approach*; *Creative Teachers, Creative Students*; *Creativity Across Domains: Faces of the Muse*; *Reason and Creativity in Development*; and *Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will*. He currently serves on the editorial board of four educational and cognitive psychology journals.

Dr. Baer has taught at all levels from elementary through graduate school; worked with gifted/talented programs for a large public-school system and a statewide summer program for creatively gifted students; served as a state director of the "Odyssey of the Mind" Creative Problem-Solving Competition; and served as a consultant to many groups, including the Union of Concerned Scientists, the National Education Association, and many local school systems in the area of promoting creative thinking and writing. His research has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the Educational Testing Service, the National Center for Educational Statistics, the Carnegie Foundation, and Rutgers and Rider Universities.

Henshon: *What led you to study creativity?*

Baer: Wow, that's really hard to answer. There are so many things that are interesting to study, so many things to learn about. I think the road that led me eventually to the kind of creativity research I now do was an interesting one, certainly for me, but it was not at all a direct path. There were a *lot* of twists and turns.

I didn't study creativity in college—I don't think anyone at Yale was studying creativity back in the mid-sixties, at least in the psychology department. The kind of psychology that was ascendant was behaviorism, which had no room for messy things like creativity. But in a very indirect way it was nonetheless B. F. Skinner himself who pushed me in the direction that would eventually lead to my creativity research.

Because I found experimental methodology interesting, I became a psychology major my freshman year, and for a while I envisioned going directly from college to grad school in psychology, even though the things behaviorists were studying—and remember, that was the dominant paradigm back then—really didn't interest me that much. But I read some advice Skinner gave to young psychologists, which he summed up by saying something like, "When you run into something really interesting, drop everything else and study it."

Now I guess for a behaviorist that meant that teaching pigeons how to play Ping-Pong was really interesting, but my interests were in other areas, like Eastern mysticism and exotic cultures. So when a flyer came around inviting students to apply for a new fellowship that the Carnegie Foundation was sponsoring, one that would send college juniors to non-Western countries to live and work for a year in the middle of their undergraduate experience, I followed Skinner's advice. I applied, was accepted, and at 19 I headed off to a remote Japanese island to work in a factory.

I didn't do any creativity research there, but my interest in things Japanese helped divert me from grad school for a while, which I think was a good thing. After a year in Japan I returned to Yale and ended up double majoring in psychology and Japanese studies, and when I graduated, I once

again followed my interests. Learning more about Japan and the world still seemed more interesting than going to grad school in psychology—something I still planned to do but wasn't quite ready for—so I headed back to Japan. I worked for a newspaper for a year and as a guide and interpreter at the 1970 World's Fair for another year before deciding it was time to return to the States and apply to graduate school.

By this time I had decided that clinical psychology would probably be a better fit than experimental psychology, so I took a job at a psychiatric hospital to get a feel for it, just until it was time to start grad school. I worked as a psychiatric aide, and the work was so interesting that I put off grad school yet another year. Then I was asked to start a program for adolescents at the hospital, so I put off starting grad school for 2 more years.

Running a program for adolescents got me involved with schools, and I found I really liked teaching, so I abandoned my plans to go to grad school entirely and became a teacher. And in my first year of teaching my principal gave me free rein to create a middle-school gifted/talented program. He said I could do whatever I wanted. The problem was, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

Almost by chance I ran into some people who had gone to the Creative Problem Solving Institute (CPSI) summer program, and they told me about CPS. I was immediately hooked and decided this should be part of the program I was designing. I went to some workshops, did some reading, and eventually completed the CPSI trainer-of-trainers program at SUNY Buffalo. I taught CPS and eventually started leading week-long residential CPS retreats at an Outdoor School that the county operated.

And that's how I decided I needed to do some creativity research, to find out if what I was doing was effective. I did my first several studies on my own, but I soon realized that to pursue the questions that really intrigued me, I'd probably need to go to grad school after all. So I did what Skinner advised—I dropped everything, even the teaching I loved—to do creativity research as a grad student. Fortunately, by this time psychology had opened up enough that some departments would tolerate research in creativity, even though creativity still wasn't recognized as a truly legitimate field of study. I got a National Science Foundation Fellowship, so I had my own funding, but even then some grad programs thought creativity research was just a bit too offbeat. But I found a very welcoming home in the Rutgers psychology department, so I went there for 3 years, did the creativity research I had mapped out, got a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology, and published my first book, *Creativity and Divergent Thinking: A Task-Specific Approach*. And I've been doing creativity research ever since.

Henshon: *Do you see connections between the creative process and the academic research process?*

Baer: I think people do research in many different ways, but for me there's a very clear connection. I use CPS to guide my planning. The process is different depending on the project, of course. But the most fun parts of research—the exploring, planning, designing, fiddling around—are very much linked to the creative process.

Henshon: *What are the most important lessons that you learned from a mentor?*

Baer: It sounds rather unimaginative to say this, but my father and mother were probably my most important mentors. My dad never graduated college, but he thought public education was crucially important. He served on and eventually became president of the school board in our county, where he managed to integrate a south-of-the–Mason Dixon school system in the 1950s, decades before most counties in the state had integrated their schools, and he also helped start a community college. He taught me the importance of hard work for goals that mattered. My mom had a sense of humor and a curiosity that I hope in at least a small way rubbed off on me, and she also understood the importance of following my interests, even when they didn't make good professional or financial sense. In this interview I've been giving Skinner a great deal of credit—somewhat tongue-in-cheek credit—for his advice to drop everything to pursue things you find interesting. But I think I really learned that from my mom.

Henshon: *If you had to name other individuals who have exerted strong influences on your thinking, who would they be?*

Baer: Teresa Amabile's development of the Consensual Assessment Technique has been hugely important to me, and I think to the field of creativity research more generally. It's given us a new way to think about creativity assessment, it's a powerful research tool, and I think it's simply the most valid method we have for judging creativity.

But the person who has had the biggest impact on my thinking is my wife, Sylvia. She's the most gifted teacher I've ever met, and her teaching isn't limited to her students and classroom. She inspires, coaches, and sometimes redirects my thinking at times when I've most needed it. Although we work in different fields—her two specialties are Emily Dickinson and children's literature—she manages both to ground what I do and what I write in common sense and to suggest an endless stream of new and sometimes fanciful ideas that I might want to pursue.

Henshon: *Can you tell us about some of your favorite teaching experiences?*

Baer: When I was teaching middle school I had the opportunity to work with classes of gifted/talented students for 3 years running—as sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Three years is a long time, and you get to know students pretty well. Although I long ago moved to a different state,

I'm still in touch with some of those students, who are now entering their 40s.

I also worked at a summer program for gifted middle-school students, the St. Mary's Center for Applied Creative Thinking. Students came from all over the state to Maryland's St. Mary's College campus, and it was simply an amazing 4 weeks. Staff and students alike were an incredibly talented, dedicated, and creative group of people. We offered courses in science, the arts, history, and mathematical problem-solving, but the focus in every course, and in everything we did at the center, was creativity. The staff also operated pretty much on a consensus model. When you combine those two ideas—creativity and consensus—you get at least two kinds of results: some *extremely* long meetings and discussions, and many wonderful, life-changing, and joyful ideas and resolutions. It was the most exhausting and exhilarating 4 weeks one could imagine.

For the past 16 years I've been teaching at Rider University, which I think provides me with the best of all possible teaching worlds. I'm a psychologist, but I teach in the School of Education, where all courses are field based. So I get to teach future teachers—an amazingly dedicated group—and also spend a good deal of time with the younger students who my Rider students are working with. On top of that, I have a group of colleagues who are both interesting and fun to work with. I can't imagine a better place to teach.

Henshon: *You've published a number of books and you're working on some new ones, including on* Creativity and Reason in Cognitive Development *(co-edited with James Kaufman), and* Being Creative Inside and Outside the Classroom. *Can you briefly give us a sense of what you explore in either or both of these books?*

Baer: James Kaufman and I have worked together on a number of books, including the two you mentioned, as well as a number of research projects. Our first book was *Creativity Across Domains: Faces of the Muse*, which looks at how creativity differs in different domains. *Creativity and Reason in Cognitive Development* examines the role that domain knowledge and reasoning skills play in creativity. There are those who have argued that knowing too much about a field can get in the way of creative insights, and we explore that idea as well as its opposite, the Ten-Year Rule, which says that it takes at least 10 years of intensive study and preparation in a field before one can make any truly creative contribution.

Being Creative Inside and Outside the Classroom is a book James and I are currently working on. It's aimed at teachers who want to nurture their students' creativity as well as their own. About 20 years ago I wrote a book for teachers called *Creative Teachers, Creative Students*. It's out of print now, and James and I decided it would be good to have an updated and totally revised book of that kind, so we're writing one. It's far enough along that we're starting to look for a publisher, but I can't say when it might be released.

Henshon: *Can you tell us a little about assessing creativity?*

Baer: Because most of the evidence I see suggests that creativity is rather domain specific, I think general-purpose, generic tests of creativity just don't make sense. If creativity in writing poetry and creativity in creating collages depend on very different sets of skills and knowledge, how could a single test predict creativity in both? I think it simply can't. I agree that divergent thinking—the ability that most "tests" of creativity try to measure—is an important part of creativity, but divergent thinking isn't a single skill. It's lots of different skills that vary by domain.

James Kaufman and I have been working on a hierarchical model of creativity for the past few years we call the APT Model, which stands for Amusement Park Theoretical Model. I'm a big fan of Disney World—my wife is a professor of English and she and I have even taught a couple courses at Disney World that used the theme parks as a field site, one on the development of children's imagination and another on multidimensional children's literature—and Disney World has a hierarchical structure that James and I thought could be good model for creativity. Just as you can get a ticket that admits you to all four Disney World theme parks, there are some very general factors, such as intelligence, that to a degree influence creativity in all areas. We call these *initial requirements*. Then there are some general thematic areas, such as communication/writing and math/science, that represent skills and interests in very broadly defined domains. This is analogous to different theme parks—at Disney World these are the Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, the Animal Kingdom, and the recently renamed Hollywood Studios. Once inside one of the theme parks—let's say the Magic Kingdom—there are special areas (e.g., Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, etc.). In the same way, each general thematic area includes many domains, such as poetry, journalism, fiction, and drama, all of which are in the communication/writing general thematic area. The skills needed for creativity in these domains have some overlap, and there are also many skills that are much more important in some than others. Readers of the *Roeper Review* may recall an article about the APT Model that was published back when we just started working on it in 2005.

An ideal creativity assessment would include different measures for different general thematic areas and different domains, but that's still some years off. What to do in the meantime? I recently completed a book about creativity assessment titled *Essentials of Creativity Assessment*. There were three authors—James Kaufman, Jonathan Plucker, and myself. I think we worked well together because we disagree very fundamentally about creativity assessment, and this allowed us to give both a balanced picture and also to note areas of disagreement about which

readers (and anyone involved in creativity assessment) should be aware.

The primary work in creativity assessment I've done recently has involved refinements of Amabile's Consensual Assessment Technique. We've been able to extend its use in many ways, taking it out of the carefully controlled experimental contexts in which it was developed and showing ways to use it with preexisting artifacts such as writings collected for NAEP writing portfolios. We've also shown that different kinds of experts are needed for different kinds of evaluations. Just as judges for the Academy Awards and for People's Choice Awards often come to different conclusions, experts in a domain (who tend to agree with one another) often disagree with nonexperts. This means that one can't simply use college students instead of actual domain experts when judging creativity. Which is unfortunate—college students are easier to find than actual experts—but no one ever promised creativity research would be easy!

Henshon: *You've also worked on creative myths and misconceptions. Can you describe some of your insights about these issues?*

Baer: The first myth I've talked about a bit already—the idea that creativity is a kind of generic ability that can be applied in any field. You might be very creative in math but not so creative in writing poetry or very creative in helping people solve personal problems but not very creative when cooking.

Now that doesn't mean that there aren't some people who are creative in lots of different areas. Nor does it mean there aren't some people whose creativity is pretty low across the board. It just means that you can't predict someone's creativity on one task based on their creativity on tasks from a different domain. If you ask the people who, let's say, wrote the more creative poems last year to write poems this year, you can reliably predict that they will write rather creative poems. I've done just that, and it's certainly true that, as in most areas of psychology, past behavior is a good predictor of future behavior. But when in comes to creativity, that's only true within a given domain. The creativity of a person's poems does *not* predict the creativity of the collages they make. I've done lots of studies using different domains that show this consistently. And that's how we know that creativity is not a general, all-purpose, domain-transcending ability. It's very domain specific, and so the fact that you may not be very creative when it comes to writing poetry tells us nothing about how creative you may be when woodworking, or teaching, or doing just about anything else. The skills that leads to creative performance tend to be very domain specific.

A second myth is that creativity is an either-you-have-it-or-you-don't kind of thing. Creativity varies from low to high, with every point in between. We often use a kind of

verbal shorthand to describe people, including ourselves, as either "creative" or "not creative." And it's true at times, and in some areas, you are probably not as creative as you might like to be. But that doesn't mean you're simply not creative, only that you want to *increase* your level of creativity. And there are lots of ways to do that—including gaining more knowledge; or looking at problems in more varied, wide-open ways; or using techniques like brainstorming to come up with lots of unusual ideas; or perhaps being willing to let problems simmer for a while rather than rush to the first possible solution we think of. But the notion that creativity is something that we either have or lack is a misconception that keeps many people from even trying.

Henshon: *What other research topics have held your interest over the years and how have they evolved?*

Baer: In the textbook of my first Introductory Psychology class there was, in chapter one, a simple equation: Behavior=Heredity+Environment+? The question mark was there to represent things like chance, acts of God, and free will. Chance appears regularly in psychology, but acts of God and free will are rarely if ever mentioned.

I've been puzzled by free will ever since then, of how to make sense of free will in a universe that science suggests is basically deterministic (with a bit of randomness thrown in, but randomness helps not at all in solving the problem of free will). I've thought about it, read a good deal of philosophy about it, and participated in seminars like one at Yale several years ago titled "God, Free Will, and the Problem of Evil," and I've continued to wonder how my colleagues make sense of free will. So a couple years ago I pitched a book idea to Oxford University Press, and they agreed. What I did was invite many of the top psychologists in the world to write about how they understand or make sense of free will. The contributors include people like Al Bandura, John Bargh, Roy Baumeister, Dan Dennett, Carol Dweck, John Kihlstrom, David Myers, Steve Pinker, Roddy Roediger, Dan Wegner, and several more—it's really quite a group. And earlier this year the book—*Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will*—was published. It's a book I've been wanting to read since I was a freshman in college.

I've also poked about in other topics. I've done a number of studies on cooperative learning and other educational psychology topics, but most of my work has been in the area of creativity—things like the domain specificity issue I've talked about already, assessment issues, gender differences in creativity, and methods of creativity training.

Henshon: *What kinds of work do you see yourself doing in the near future?*

Baer: I'll continue to work on refinement of the Consensual Assessment Technique, especially in the area of who

are appropriate experts for a particular collection of artifacts. The other major area in which I'll be working is further refinement of the APT Model. There's a great deal of work to be done fleshing out this model and perhaps developing assessment tools for different parts of the model.

One new area that I'm just starting to explore is creativity in conflict transformation. There's some rather exciting work being done in the field of conflict resolution and peace studies, and I'm trying to learn more to see in what ways those fields and the field of creativity research can perhaps enrich one another.

Henshon: *What are some other future developments you hope to see in the field of creative studies?*

Baer: I'll just wait to see what unfolds. There are a lot of creative people doing interesting work in the field these days, and I trust that the next few decades will be exciting ones in the area of creativity research.

Henshon: *What advice would you give a fledgling scholar?*

Baer: Follow Skinner's—and my mom's—advice: When you run into something really interesting, drop everything else and study it.

AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Suzanna E. Henshon graduated from William & Mary in 2005 with a PhD and teaches creative writing at Florida Gulf Coast University. She is the author of seven published books, including *Spiders on the Ceiling (2006) and King Arthur's Academy: Descriptive and Narrative Exercises (2007).* E-mail: shenshon@fgcu.edu