

Inspiration

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Definition

Inspiration denotes a mundane experience that has a long history of being reflected upon and aspired to. However, due to its complexity and mystical associations, it has received until now little scientific attention. When studied empirically, this phenomenon is typically understood as a cognitive or motivational process, one that involves both a receptive (inspired by) and agentic (inspired to) dimension. It's relation to creativity in particular has been of considerable interest, with different authors portraying inspiration as either an antecedent or consequence of getting creative ideas. Sociocultural psychology, for example, understands inspiration as a state of active receptivity, one in which the person is animated to pursue and explore the possible. This entry starts with the definition of inspiration and its history, before moving on to summarizing empirical research in this area. It focuses in particular on the relation between inspiration, creativity, and the possible within a sociocultural framework. Some reflections on how to cultivate inspiration or, rather, the conditions that foster it, are offered towards the end.

Keywords: inspiration, inspired by, inspired to, creativity, possible, sociocultural psychology.

While the notion of inspiration commonly appears in lay discussions, scientific studies of this phenomenon are scarce. On the one hand, lay people are reminded of Edison's remark that **genius** is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration or, conversely, of the ancient view that creators and leaders work with the help of 'divine' inspiration. Scientific research in this area, on the other hand, has a great contribution to make both to our understanding of inspiration and of the possible, by pointing to the mind's readiness to expand its own range of possibilities. This kind of research is of interest across disciplines and, indeed, inspiration attracted attention in a number of fields, e.g., theology, literary criticism, management, engineering, education, the arts, as well as several branches of psychology (Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick & Maruskin, 2014, p. 495).

Denoting a familiar type of experience, inspiration is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be triggered by a variety of encounters: with **role models** and **mentors**, with **nature** or **beauty**, or in moments **revelation** (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, p. 871). Moreover, inspiration can be experienced at different levels of 'intensity', from more mundane forms of getting new **insights** to intense

moments of epiphany and awe that can mark one's very existence (see section Awe). It is specific for the activity of talented artists, scientists, inventors or entrepreneurs, but also present in daily events and undertakings. As Hart (1998, p. 10) noted, "what is common among these is the idea of inspiration as a specific and nonordinary process of learning or knowing". Inspiration is thus an experience that involves not only affect but also cognition, motivation and, more generally, the person as a whole in his or her interaction with the world.

This entry will start by defining inspiration and considering it in historical context. It will continue with a brief review of empirical research on inspiration – both quantitative and qualitative – and focus on a sociocultural approach to it. Last but not least, it will consider how inspiration can be cultivated, even if it should not and, indeed, cannot be willed.

Definition and history

Etymologically, the notion of inspiration comes from the Latin *inspirare* which means 'to breathe into' (*in* plus *spirare* or 'to breathe', also related for the word for 'spirit'), 'to be filled', or 'to inflame'. Related to the Latin conception is also the Greek origin of the term for *enthusiasm*, which implies being possessed by a god or becoming the recipient of divine inspiration (Hart, 1998, p. 8). Each of these associations continued through the ages, e.g., the view that inspiration comes from above or from beyond the person, that it somehow takes possession of the creator, and that it generates strong emotional reactions. These ideas resonate with the general definition listed in the Oxford English Dictionary: "a breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1036).

Several of the features mentioned above – e.g., ideation and insight, creativity, exaltation – are present also in scientific definitions and approaches. For example, Hart noted that:

"Inspiration is a specific epistemic process (...) characterized by a remembrance or recognition of some knowledge or perspective valuable in the social or psychological context given. The acquisition or awareness of knowledge takes the form of an expansion of understanding that involves (...) transcendence of the conventional. As such, inspiration describes (...) knowing that can be cultivated but not willed" (Hart, 1998, p. 32).

This definition captures, to some extent, what Thrash and Elliot (2003) identified as the three main components of inspiration: transcendence (awareness of new possibilities), evocation or receptivity (not attributing the responsibility for being inspired to oneself), and motivational approach (positive activation). The main difference lays in the cognitive or knowledge emphasis

of the former, and the motivational emphasis of the latter. Both conceptualizations, however, underline the distinction between a more passive and receptive element of inspiration ('being inspired by') and a more dynamic, action-oriented one ('being inspired to') (for a more detailed discussion see Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Last but not least, the definitions above both point to the link between inspiration and **creativity** or **creative ideation** (see section Creativity).

These associations have, of course, their own history, and it is interesting to note that the meaning, place and value of inspiration varied according to historical times (see also Hart, 1998). For example, in the ancient world, inspiration was considered to come from outside the person, from gods or the **muses**, who would 'fill up' their recipient with skill and ideas. Interestingly, two opposing views of this experience were already available: the rational and solar path of Apollo versus the wild, unpredictable and orgiastic influences of Dionysus. The belief in divine inspiration was kept through the Middle Ages, resonating with the value placed, at the time, on faith and revelation. The Renaissance marked a turning point in this regard, gradually leading to the 'internalization' of inspiration and its processes; i.e., inspiration was attributed to the unique qualities of those inspired. The advent of **psychology** as a science, many centuries later, took further steps into making inspiration and intra-psychic phenomenon, replacing it with **illumination** or insight and attributing it to the **unconscious** (see section Unconscious). This last association, cemented during Romanticism, helped it gain in popularity, but also made it difficult to advance the scientific study of inspiration, at least within the positivist tradition. In contrast, contemporary accounts of creative people tend to attribute inspiration back to the environment, contract with nature, and even transcendental influences (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, p. 872).

What this brief historical account points us to is the fact that, beneath the surface of tidy definitions, inspiration as a phenomenon presents us with a range of **paradoxes**. They are represented by the simultaneity, in the experience of being inspired, of different, oftentimes contradictory, states or impulses: passive and active, order and chaos, rationality and irrationality, equilibrium and disequilibrium, individuation and de-individuation, conscious and unconscious, external and internal, divine and human, ordinary and extraordinary, among others. This state of affairs inspired Thrash and colleagues to note that "it is through grappling with the paradox of inspiration, we argue, that psychology will shed light on the farther reaches of human nature" (Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick & Maruskin, 2014, p. 496). And, we can add here, also help us reach a deeper understanding of creativity and what it means to explore the possible.

Research on inspiration

As mentioned from the start, empirical research on inspiration has been scarce, even if not altogether absent. Progress in this area has been hampered, as Thrash et al. (2014, p. 495)

remarked, by “definitional ambiguities and inconsistencies, an absence of foundational construct validation research (...) and a variety of myths and misconceptions about inspiration that have arisen from sources other than rigorous science”. And yet, the past three decades have witnessed an increased number of studies in this area, both quantitative (psychometric and experimental) and qualitative (observation and interview-based).

Many of these advances can be attributed to work done by Todd Thrash and Andrew Elliot. As mentioned in the previous section, they proposed an influential three component framework of inspiration including “motivation (e.g., activation, energy), evocation (e.g., feeling overtaken, uncontrol, attraction from the object, openness), and transcendence (e.g., positivity, enhancement, clarity)” (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, p. 873). Later on, a process model was added, one that distinguishes being *inspired by* and being *inspired to*. In linking the two models, the authors proposed that being inspired by gives rise to transcendence and evocation, while being inspired to gives rise to approach motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). The study of these components and processes required a valid measurement tool and this was conceived by Thrash and Elliot (2003) in the form of the *Inspiration Scale* (IS), an eight items, self-report instrument designed to capture primarily trait inspiration (although claimed to be useful also for the study of state inspiration). The IS comprises two subscales with four items each, one focused on frequency and the other one on intensity. Examples of items include: “Something I encounter or experience inspires me” and “I am inspired to do something”. While these formulations sound rather simplistic and general, the IS has proven, according to its authors, good psychometric properties, demonstrating both invariance across time and invariance across populations.

Using this scale, Thrash and Elliot (2003, p. 885) documented a number of correlations between inspiration and a series of psychological and biological indicators. For instance, inspiration was found to correlate positively with the behavioral activation system (but not the behavioral inhibition system), with extraversion and *openness to experience* (but not with neuroticism and conscientiousness; see section Openness to Experience), with positive emotions (but not negative ones), with work mastery (but negatively with competitiveness), with *intrinsic motivation* (but negatively with *extrinsic motivation*), with creativity, perceived competence, *self-esteem*, and *optimism*. These findings have been discussed by the two authors in relation to the three components of inspiration and considered to support the general model. However, a distinctive limitation of these studies has to do with their correlational nature, making it difficult to draw causal inferences. Thus, for example, one might wonder if creativity, perceived competence, self-esteem, and optimism are antecedents, consequences of inspiration or both.

There are few experimental investigations of inspiration, principally emerging from the work of Takeshi Okada and his collaborators, who focused primarily on the relationship between

inspiration and creativity. For example, they tested recently whether viewing or **copying** prior examples impacts creative outputs in art (see Okada & Ishibashi, 2016). In three experiments, they found evidence that copying unfamiliar abstract drawings led participants to produce drawings that were qualitatively different than the original model, that exposure to unfamiliar styles facilitated creativity in **drawing**, and that both copying and viewing artwork with an unfamiliar style had this effect (while merely thinking about alternative styles did not). The authors explained these findings by pointing to the relaxation of cognitive constraints and the emergence of new perspectives (see section Perspective). When people **imitate** the works of others, they relate them to their own cognitive framework but, when the latter don't connect, the framework itself needs to be challenged (i.e., constraint relaxation takes place) and changed (through the birth of new perspectives). These are important findings, but they need both to be replicated, including on different populations, and complemented also by a richer description of inspiration as a process, an aim accomplished best by qualitative research.

Hart (1998) reported one of the first investigations of this kind, using 70 in-depth interviews with participants from a wide range of professions (unlike psychometric and experimental studies, mostly conducted on undergraduate students), to examine what experiences and meanings are associated with inspiration. He discovered four phenomenological characteristics of inspiration: connectedness, openness, clarity, and energy. While one or the other might get to dominate a person's experience of inspiration, the phenomenon itself requires all four dimensions. Another, more recent study, was conducted by Glăveanu and colleagues (2013) on the experience of creators working in five different domains: art, science, design, music, and film scriptwriting. While this research was not primarily focused on inspiration, it did document, in creators' discourses, the paramount importance of this phenomenon. For instance, in referring to their approach to work, **artists** often defined themselves as 'sponges', as being '90% in a receptive state', and allowing themselves to be 'impregnated' by things and people who enter an inner 'factory of fermentation'. In **design** 'inspiration comes from everywhere', so you need to 'keep your antennas out', to be 'attentive' and 'open to the world', to be 'nurtured' by the work of others, to 'collect' things and to store them in a 'bank' of ideas. **Scriptwriters** have habitually the attitude of a 'hunter in the forest', 'permanently nourished by the spectacle of others', and so on. These accounts, as we shall see next, are important for reexamining the link between creativity and inspiration and, even more, for reflecting on its relation to the possible.

Inspiration, creativity and the possible

One of the most extensively studied connections in the literature is that between inspiration and creativity. In fact, this relationship is so close that Thrash and colleagues (2014, p. 496) listed

various possible roles played by inspiration in the creative process including delivering ideas, evoking creative states, facilitating insight, making creators aware of ideas, motivating them, and even being synonymous with insight or with creativity itself. While inspiration might participate in more than one way within the creative process, it is counterproductive to equate the two. The latter would make it difficult to capture the unique characteristics of each or, more generally, consider the temporal order between these phenomena.

With regard to temporality, one common belief is that inspiration *precedes* creativity. In other words, one needs to feel inspired before producing something novel and valuable. This is what Hart (1998) associated with the phase of waiting for inspiration or illumination in the creative process. He wrote that, “the extent to which we courageously invest or risk our energies in a particular venture will reflect in the depth of the *encounter* and of the quality of the inspiration” (p. 8). One of the main limitations of this standpoint is that inspiration tends to be reduced to the first, initial or preparatory stages of creativity – couldn’t a creator feel inspired throughout? Thrash and his collaborators seem to believe so. In fact, they proposed and tested a rather usual idea: that inspiration to create is “a motivational state that is evoked in response to getting a creative idea and that compels the individual to transform the creative idea into a creative product” (Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer & Ryan, 2010, p. 470). As such, instead of fueling creative ideation, inspiration is rather *fueled by it*. The emerging image is one of inspiration as mediating the link between creative idea and its realization. As mentioned by Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick and Maruskin (2014, p. 501), “all forms of inspiration are fundamentally constructive processes in which new entities (e.g., poems, future selves, or a spiritual life) are brought into fruition”.

How does this claim fare when it comes to empirical testing? Thrash and colleagues (2010) offered some evidence supporting their claims, at least in the field of creative *writing*. Several studies in this area evidenced the fact that getting creative ideas and being inspired are distinct phases and that the former precedes the latter. Moreover, inspiration predicts creativity in writing (while effort predicts technical merit). Last but not least, peaks in inspiration predict peaks in creativity. Based on this, the authors proposed the ‘transmission function’ of inspiration, mediating between the creativity of the idea and that of the product. They concluded as follows:

“Although creativity researchers sometimes portray inspiration as an account of the *origin* of creative ideas – creative ideas are given by God or a Muse – our portrayal of inspiration as concerning the *transmission* of creative ideas is consistent with its usage in theology. Rather than being a source of creative ideas, inspiration is the resulting intentional (i.e.,

object-focused) state, which has the creative idea as its content and actualization of the idea as its aim” (p. 470).

But, once more, if inspiration is not the source of creative ideas, can it be reduced to a mere ‘response’ to them? More importantly, is being inspired a state of mind that is closed to the possible – in this case, possible new ideas emerging – and focused on the realization of one single, inspiring idea? A sociocultural reading of inspiration differs considerably in this regard: it views inspiration as opening up the possible rather than turning one possibility into actuality. As a discipline focused on the interdependence between mind and culture (Shweder, 1990), sociocultural psychology considers inspiration to be both a relational process, connecting person and environment (both ‘internal’ and ‘external’), and a personal *experience*. The essential characteristic of inspiration as an experience rests in the mind’s readiness to be inspired. As Pasteur allegedly remarked, fortune favors the prepared mind (Eckert & Stacey, 1998). This means that, while specific encounters, ideas or events might have a higher chance of inspiring people (to act or, more specifically, to act creatively), inspiration itself requires the ‘collaboration’ between person and environment in which the person experiences a state of *alert receptivity*. This state of mind captures one of the main paradoxes of inspiration as a phenomenon: the interplay and, to a great extent, simultaneity between passivity and activity, between being inspired by and being inspired to. What is the person alert and receptive to? In summary, he or she is *receptive to new, emerging perspective, and alert as to what their possibilities might be for both thought and action*.

There is, thus, an important connection to be made between inspiration and the possible. Previously, Glăveanu (2017) distinguished between three inter-related, cyclical stages in engaging with the possible: *awareness, excitement, exploration*. Inspiration characterizes best the experience of excitement about the possible and what might come next, a basic form of receptivity and openness. As such, the experience of being inspired is often triggered by a new perspective that makes the person aware that more is conceivable within a given situation. This understanding doesn’t subordinate inspiration to creativity – indeed, someone might be inspired to do other things, for instance meditate rather than create, and there are moments in the creative process that are seemingly void of inspiration (i.e., when new perspectives are neither encouraged or looked for). There are here some points of overlap with Thrash’s conception and also some major differences. The main difference has to do with the fact that inspiration is not seen as a search for how to best implement a certain idea, but a search for new perspectives that open up new possibilities. In addition, a new dimension that is added by the sociocultural approach is the *community* one. Psychological accounts typically locate inspiration within the

person or, at best, interpersonal exchanges. Yet, inspiration is also a social and cultural phenomenon inasmuch as broader historical trends, making up the *zeitgeist* of a certain era and place, influence what fuels the *imagination* and creativity of an individual or a community.

Cultivating inspiration

A main point of agreement among different theorists is that being inspired is associated with (mainly) positive consequences. Key among them, as argued here, is the person's propensity to engage with what is possible and explore possibilities beyond the initial source of inspiration. As such, a last important question emerges: how can one cultivate inspiration?

Before addressing this question, we would need to reflect first on how inspiration is expressed since, not knowing what to look for, one would hardly be able to distinguish between being inspired and simply being active or interested. In line with the sociocultural account sketched in the previous section, a person is inspired when he or she explores existing ideas and perspective with a view towards what could *emerge* from them. Essential to note, once a certain perspective is embraced and pursued, one can no longer talk about inspiration but continued interest. Inspiration, as described before, is characterized precisely by an active and receptive openness to the possible; once a commitment is made, inspiration morphs into other forms of motivation (e.g., the develop further, to translate a perspective into practice). At a phenomenological level, therefore, inspiration is often experienced as an insight that is *about to come*, that is driven by the source of inspiration (not by the person; what Thrash and colleagues referred to as evocation), that is on the 'tip of the tongue'.

What are possible *sources of inspiration* then? As Hart (1998, p. 27) aptly wrote, "given the right mindset, virtually anything could be found to be a trigger". While creators working in various domains might mention that they find new, interesting perspectives in nature, in dialogue with other people, by exploring their own unconscious, by copying the work of others, etc. (see Glăveanu et al., 2013; Eckert & Stacey, 1998; Okada & Ishibashi, 2016), in reality the role and impact of each one will depend on existing dialogues and perspectives. In some cases, the value of what seems like sensible advice, for instance to look for conceptual distant rather than proximal sources of inspiration, is disproven by research (Chan, Dow & Schunn, 2015). As such, producing lists of what could help people get inspired is a rather futile exercise; what matters more is cultivating the kind of receptivity to one's environment that invites moments of inspiration. In this regard, Hart's (1998) advice is to reflect on one's focus, on trust, letting go, and *listening*. These are, each one, useful pieces of advice as they invite us not to commit too soon to one solution, idea or perspective, to let things incubate for a while, to learn to let go of old, conventional ideas and, last but not least, to listen actively and openly to others and even to

oneself. Instead of formulating a ‘one method fit all’ approach, cultivating inspiration would benefit from developing **meta-cognitive** skills that allow the person to monitor when, where and how he or she gets inspired. Keeping track of the process, including surrounding oneself with potential inspiration triggers, requires considerable **reflexivity** (see section Reflexivity).

Most importantly, one needs to remember that, while inspiration can be cultivated, mainly by developing a deeper understanding of its individual dynamic, it can never be willed or forced. Just like being inspired by the sense of new possibilities is an integral part of our lives, being able to grasp these possibilities requires patience and letting go, not only active pursuit. As Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick and Maruskin (2014) eloquently remind us:

“Yes, it is indeed difficult to elicit inspiration. Inspiration tends to happen to people spontaneously in the natural context of everyday life. Authentic inspiration experiences usually are not the result of a deliberate effort of one party (e.g., a researcher, employer, or author of a self-help book) to inspire another; literally and figuratively, inspiration refers to ‘breathing in’, not to being ‘blown into’” (p. 506).

Conclusion

Inspiration is an ordinary experience which has an important part to play both in creativity and in how we engage with and explore the possible. While it has been theorized in the past in purely psychological terms, as a motivational state or an epistemic process, inspiration actually takes place at and through the encounter between person and world. Indeed, society, culture and community all participate in getting inspired, even if their work is often invisible. As such, a sociocultural reading of this phenomenon describes it as active receptivity, a socio-psychological and embodied state in which a sense of excitement about what is possible is both triggered and maintained. This means that inspiration might not start from a creative idea and lead to its realization, as it has been proposed in the past, but precede this stage. In fact, choosing to pursue a particular idea might very well signal the end of being inspired. In contrast, inspiration, as discussed here, is characterized by the open-ended process of looking for new perspectives based on the relationships established between them. As such, it can be cultivated by becoming sensitive to new perspectives acquired through dialogues with others, exploring nature, reflecting on one’s own experiences, valuing accidents and the unexpected, etc. In the end, while inspiration itself can never be willed, the conditions for being inspired can and should be understood and fostered; after all, this is a state reached most easily by *prepared minds*.

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