

Creator's Wisdom - Emotional Knowledge of Artistically Creative Professionals in Work

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to investigate the *emotional knowledge* attached to artistically creative intensive working.

Intrapersonal talents of artistically creative persons are reported to be highly developed. This could be interpreted as that an artist at work is very good at sensing his or her own feelings and emotional experiences. On the other hand, artistic work itself offers to its practitioner a great possibility for an *introspection* – a journey to understanding oneself. The studies show that creative action strongly feeds the *self-knowledge* of the actor. This could be seen as a *positively supportive circle of creation*.

Artistically creative persons are often also more devoted and sensitive to the *social and natural environments* around them than average people are. Fruits of these skills may concretely appear in relationships to other people as well as in the work of artistically creative practitioners, as pieces of art or good design. This emotional quality which we may call *emphaty, symphaty or compassion*, in addition to a profound self-knowledge, is exceedingly *central* in the working life of artistically creative professionals, and should be taken in consideration in many other areas of research in human sciences – not uniquely in the area of design.

*'It is with the heart that one sees rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.'*
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: The Little Prince¹

This paper is about artistically creative professionals from the viewpoint of emotions attached to the act of creation itself. First, I will try to sketch and share a map of the emotional landscape of creative professionals. I try to enlight certain feelings and emotional experiences faced in intensive work. Secondly, it will speak about the vitality of emotional knowledge of creative professionals. These two themes are not separate - they are highly intertwined, which is, I think, the very soul and heart of the whole discussion about emotions and creative professionals. The content of this paper is based on my ongoing research² in the field of design research.

Intuitive Knowing and Rational Knowledge

Feelings and emotions, as well as reasoning and rationality, are inevitable parts of what living and being human is. We may call our emotional life also as an instinct life, or intuition. It is clear, that we need in our daily life both intuitive knowing and rational knowledge. Those are vital in living a human life, surviving and living with others.

Rational knowledge refers to thinking mind and making analysis based on intellectual knowledge. Intuition is about immediate knowing. It is about making decisions, consciously or unconsciously, based on feelings and emotional knowledge. The emotional mind and the thinking mind operate in harmony – for the most part. Sometimes, the emotional mind just commands whatever the thinking mind would have to say.

A Finnish musician Olli Mustonen³ explained in a fantastically simple way the difference between these two knowledge types in relation to his composing work. When a piece of music is ready and under his evaluation, he said that sometimes it happens that although he is analysing the composition to be truly correct and fine according to all musical theories, he might just *know* that it would not work. Although he cannot point out the parts of the composition which are invalid or poor, he just feels that the whole piece would not work.

The case of Mustonen is truly familiar to designers as well as design managers. Comparing to free artists, working in independent basis, totally with their own inspiration, designers as well as architects and managers have to face multiple limitations considering the piece of work itself. The result of the creative process is not just a outcome or burst of pure emotions. Many aesthetical, ethical, economical, manufactural, material, logistical and communicational issues have to be taken into account. This may be seen as a challenge - and a trigger for creativity, inspiration and imagination.

On the other hand, another Finnish musician, Jarmo Saari⁴, has put forward that he may sometimes consciously set limitations for himself while he is composing independently. He likes challenges. Saari said that it might be easier to start composing and let inspiration wake up while having for example just certain instruments, a subject, an atmosphere and a duration, which is the case when he is composing a commissioned piece of music. The natural situation in independent work would be that he would have all notes and tunes and instruments in the world available.

As we know, there are many ways of finding harmony between thinking and emotional mind. Always, the harmony sets, in a way or another. Otherwise, there would not be any outcome of the process.

Emotional Intelligence of Creators

The very strength of creative professionals is the firm emotional knowledge which stems from very well developed self-awareness. Self-awareness refers to self-reflexive, introspective attitude to one's own experience, sometimes called "*mindfulness*"⁵. According to many empirical studies, artistically creative persons are described to be more sensitive to their own inner feelings and experiences than average people are. Their *intrapersonal* talents are reported to be highly developed. This could be interpreted as that an artist at work is very good at sensing his own feelings and emotional experiences.

The concept of intrapersonal talent belongs to Howard Gardner's famous theory of key intelligences including eight types: verbal, mathematical-logical, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, naturalistical, interpersonal and intrapersonal. The two last ones Gardner calls the personal intelligences and describes them in a following way:

'Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them. Successful salespeople, politicians, teachers, clinicians, and religious leaders are

*all likely to be individuals with high degrees of interpersonal intelligence. Intrapersonal intelligence ... is a correlative ability, turned inward. It is a capacity to form an accurate, veridical model of oneself and to be able to use that model to operate efficiently in life.*⁶

The intrapersonal skill is the key to self-knowledge. According to Gardner, it is *'access to one's own feelings and the ability to discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behaviour.'*⁷

Peter Salovey subsumes Gardner's personal skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, in his original definition of emotional intelligence⁸. Salovey's definition includes five domains: 1) knowing one's emotions, 2) managing emotions, 3) motivating oneself, 4) recognizing emotions in others, and 5) handling relationships. The first domain, knowing one's emotions, refers to self-awareness. Person with strong self-awareness is more aware and certain of his own feelings as they occur.

David Goleman's notion about Salovey's third domain of emotional intelligence, the motivating oneself, is highly interesting in reference to the talents of designers and artists in different areas: *'marshaling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention, for self-motivation and mastery, and for creativity'*⁹.

The last two of Salovey's domains of emotional intelligence, which are recognizing emotions in others and handling relationships, refer to social competence and interpersonal abilities. The ability for empathy builds on emotional self-awareness. It is a very fundamental human skill. *'People who are empathic are more attuned to the subtle social signals that indicate what others need or want. This makes them better at callings such as the caring professions, teaching, sales, and management.'*¹⁰ Artistically creative persons are also often more devoted and sensitive to the social and natural environments around them than average people are. Fruits of this knowledge may concretely appear in relationships to other people as well as in the work of artistically creative practitioners, as pieces of art or good design. People who excel in interpersonal skills *'do well at anything that relies on interaction smoothly with others; they are social stars'* as Goleman¹¹ elegantly puts it.

Creating individuals with good self-awareness excel both in quality and quantity. Those masters of creation who create high-quality outcomes, products and objects, are also quantitatively measured very productive. Further, what is interesting for practising designers and artists, Goleman states that *'being able to get into the "flow" state enables outstanding performance of all kinds. People who have this skill tend to be more highly productive and effective whatever they undertake.'*¹² This may be called some sort of emotional self-control.

It is time to look, once again, the concept of *emotional intelligence* introduced 1996 by Daniel Goleman which includes *'self-awareness and impulse control, persistence, zeal and motivation, empathy and social deftness'*. Thinking the notions handled above, we might say that the factors of emotional intelligence suit well to the picture of a creator at his or her best. Emotional aptitude is a *'meta-ability'*. It determines how well we can use the other skills we have - also the raw intellect.

The Vital Circle of Creation

Creative process itself has an introspectative nature. Artistic work itself offers to its practitioner a great possibility for an *introspection* – a journey to understanding oneself. The studies show that creative action strongly feeds the *self-knowledge* of the actor. Feelings and emotional experiences faced in the process of creation shape the practitioner himself and his own emotional being. The actor meets his own emotions in an intensive working process and might then have an open pathway to his emotions, senses, experiences, feelings, memories and desires. An established Finnish painter Silja Rantanen puts this idea delicately:

*'When one concentrates to one's motive one is all autistic or wrapped up in oneself. But one does not observe oneself. One does not pose at all. At the time one is though most in oneself. [...] In work I have many times, already as young, thought how contradictory the situation is when people who know me well can never be together with me when I create. Although, just in that moment I am the most myself and the most entire me. [...] It is very satisfying to be oneself, tirelessly.'*¹³

Creative work can carry a therapeutical function for the practitioner himself, as also to the spectators. Creative work is in many ways extraordinarily rewarding not less in a way of letting its practitioner to understand oneself better. A very skilled Finnish conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen has said this focal idea of this paper in a straightforward way: *'If somebody would ask me which are the best moments in life [...] Those would be the moments when I do understand something about myself.'*¹⁴

We may now sketch a shape of a dynamic circle around the facts stated above. The facts that 1) creatively talented persons are emotionally sensitive and highly intrapersonally developed, 2) that creative action feeds creator's self-knowledge, 3) that self-knowledge feeds further other emotional skills, especially empathic skills, and 4) that people with good self-awareness are productive and excel both in quality and quantity, may seen as a positively supportive dynamic circle of creative actions.

The messages of outcomes of this primary circle of creation can be reached, seen and heard, by other people. These are emotional messages which observers are interpreting in their individual ways. Always, the messages communicate feelings which awake the observer to resonate emotionally – feel, experience or memorize – and so further know better himself, and also grow in the knowledge of empathy.

Yrjö Hirn writes in his classic of aesthetics¹⁵ that it is the **emotional mental state** which distinguishes artistical creation from practical and theoretical activities. He sets his appropriate definition of the concept of aesthetical creation in a following way:

*'A piece of art or an artistical expression is a product of an activity with which an emotional mental state has got a complete and universal expression in an external form or figure which makes free and "disinterested" observation possible, and which in stead of the agitating and embarrassing impressions of non-aesthetical life awakes a pure contemplative pleasure in the observer.'*¹⁶

Emotional mental state is getting fulfilled in aesthetical production and awakes pure contemplative feeling of pleasure in a spectator. In the best case, a piece of creation may get the observer himself to concretely create something which may be a thought, a feeling, a gesture or a decision.

Pieces of creation are as fairytales, emotional visions of the world, which feed emotional skills as empathy of the listener. Creative practitioners have a vital role in today's society not only workers of aesthetical and ethical qualities but also as workers of emotions. In this time of indifference and segregation the emotional knowledge, especially the ability for empathy, is vital to sustain our human life human.

Dances between Emotions

According to my research with creative professionals from various areas of art¹⁷, there are some basic feelings and emotional experiences which arise up in an intensive working process. These feelings are **dynamic** and change

all the time in the process of working. One pattern is common to these feelings: The opposite feelings and emotional experiences change as they would be *dancing with and between* each other.

Dances between emotional experiences are taking place in following pairs: confidence and inconfidence to oneself, certainty and uncertainty of decisions, feeling of security and insecurity, euphoria and fear, feeling oneself fragile and strong, feeling of consciousness and unconsciousness, solitudeness and togetherness, love and hate, clearness of thought and polyphony of ideas. I will not go deeper in these feelings in this paper. The meaning of opening up the range of the feelings here is to show how *basic* human feelings and emotions are closely attached to intensive creative processes.

Creator's Wisdom?

Why do artistically creative practitioners actually do what they do for living? Naturally, there is an indefinite number of reasons; chance, interest, talents, heritage or culture. Creative work could be seen very rewarding as a profession from the perspective of emotional development of an individual. But now a question: May feelings and emotions experienced in intensive work and the emotional well-being gained through self-awareness be *the inner driving forces* to create - the powers of creation?

What we can learn about this all? To keep oneself fit to work in a chosen profession means to a creative professional *to keep oneself able to create*. The real master of creative act is like a virtuosical player who can play his emotional knowledges as a good instrument - and tune it for the music at the time, under play.

Inspiration, which may as a word suffer from serious inflation, is not a moment or mental state to be waited for by professional creators, but a thing to be created to grow. A dilettant is waiting for inspiration, but a professional does not wait - he *creates the inspiration*. It will say that the ability to keep oneself capable to create, having *the power of creation*, is an essential part of *creative craftsmanship*, a professional skill. A creator would not be a professional creator if he would lack all control over his creative abilities.

The ability to create needs multiple skills, but the most vital ones are, firstly, *to be able to get inspired*, and secondly, *to get oneself to accomplish an outcome*. To excel in these two points of work one needs emotional self-control, a firm self-knowledge and emphatic skills. The power of emotions is huge whether we investigate the excellence in the area of creation - or life in general. Emotional qualities are exceedingly central and should be taken in consideration in many areas of research in human sciences - as well as in everyday business and private life - not uniquely in the area of design.

The final question is: Does the wisdom, and the very power, of creators lay in emotional skills, in the self-awareness and in the ability for empathy?

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Notes

- ¹ 'On ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.' Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: Le Petit Prince.
- ² Haavisto, 2003.
- ³ Mustonen, 2002.
- ⁴ Saari, 2000.
- ⁵ Goleman, 1996, 315.
- ⁶ Gardner, 1983, 9.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Salovey, 1990, 189.
- ⁹ Goleman, 1996, 93.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 43.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 43-44.
- ¹² Ibid., 43.
- ¹³ Haavisto, 2000, 93-94: 'När man koncentrerar sig på sitt motiv är man helt autistisk eller insluten i sig själv och man är helt utlämnad åt sig själv, men man bryr sig inte om sig själv. Man poserar inte ett dugg. Samtidigt är man ändå som mest inne i sig själv. [...] I själva verket har jag många gånger redan som alldeles ung funderat på hur motstridigt det är att även de människor som känner mig väl aldrig kan vara ett med mig då jag skapar, trots att jag just i det ögonblicket är som mest mig själv och mest fullständig. [...] Det är ju mycket tillfredsställande att vara sig själv, restlöst.'
- ¹⁴ Salonen, 2002.
- ¹⁵ Hirn, 1913.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 106: 'Ett konstverk eller en konstyttring är en produkt af en verksamhet, genom hvilken ett mänskligt själstillstånd af utprägladt känslöbetonad karaktär blifvit fullt och helt uttryckt i en yttre form eller gestalt, som möjliggör en fri och "intresselös" betraktelse, och som därmed, i stället för det utomestetiska lifvets upprörande eller förvirrande intryck, bjuder åt betraktaren en rent kontemplativ lustförmimelse'.
- ¹⁷ Haavisto, 2003.

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Virpi Haavisto (b. 1967) lectures at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, Faculty of Design. Her phenomenologically oriented research on the feelings and experiences of artistically creative professionals at work has been met with considerable interest, as it relies strongly both on empirics and philosophy – and is still firmly down-to-earth in the core of the subject matter of design. Virpi Haavisto is also a practising graphic designer and a director in her own design agency, Avantage Ltd.