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The Interplay of Sounds and Contexts:
What Motivates Victor to Create Music

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Abstract

Motivation of artists has traditionally been treated as a construct that can be examined and measured without considering the broader context in which it occurs. While through measurements it is possible to learn to what degree artists are motivated, it is the broader context consisting of life experiences and culture in which they create that forms the foundation of motivation. In an ethnographic case study, motivation of an acoustic guitar player in different periods of his life has been examined. The interplay of elements such as the high value attached to music, a stimulating environment, enjoyment of the creative process, and receiving feedback, striving for independence, and seeking novelty emerged as sources of motivation to compose and perform music. The study illustrates the complexity of the nature of motivation which, despite its identifiable sources, is shaped by the emotional, socio-cultural environment of the individual.

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“1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough, 2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992, Appendix). These are the first two questions out of ten which make up a General Self-Efficacy scale widely used to measure one’s motivation. While I may answer “4=exactly true” to every question, how much can I learn about where and how my motivation occurs?

I have been fascinated by the complexity of motivation and how it is intertwined with other elements that merge in the artists’ lives. In *Madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century Literary imagination*, for instance, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) sketch the portraits of women poets and novelists who had to conform to the rigid societal expectations of living in the domestic realm rather than pursuing literary careers. Had these women filled out Jerusalem’s and Schwarzer’s questionnaire, it would have probably shown their high self-efficacy. After all, they did “try hard enough” to solve problems and were able to write, and they surely did “find means and ways” to get what they wanted. However, without knowing the context in which they were able to succeed, it is not possible to speculate what helped them to be so motivated despite the cultural norms that were not supportive of women’s literary pursuits.

In the present article I want to explore the importance of context for studying motivation. I will describe the motivation of Victor, an acoustic guitar player, to compose and perform music, in the context of his life. In other words, in describing his motivation over time, I will highlight various circumstances that either increased or decreased his level of motivation.

Literature that has motivated my own investigation

For over half a century, motivation has mostly been examined with the use of cognitive approaches. They differ in their views on motivation—for instance a contemporary model of achievement motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985), stresses the importance of goals and perception of one's capabilities. The attribution theory of motivation seeks to explain the causes of different behaviors (Weiner, 1985, 1992). Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory stresses the connection between goals and expectations. Motivation is viewed as goal-directed behavior which is instigated and sustained by one's expectations of outcomes. The common goal of all these approaches is to measure the level of motivation and to examine whether the findings are applicable to different environments (e.g. grade levels) or populations (e.g. of students with eating disorders).

In her book entitled *Midnight disease, The drive to write, writer's block, and the creative brain*, Alice Flaherty (2004) points out that cognitive approaches highlight the role of conscious skills, e.g. evidence collection or problem definition. What these approaches fail to consider in-depth, however, is the effect of unconscious emotions. For instance, she points out that a person may have a writer's block not because of their cognitive abilities, but because of the emotional states that they experience (e.g. an insecure position in one's closest environment). She brings up Zachary Leader's observation that when a poet edits his manuscript at a too early stage, it not necessarily because "...he doesn't know better, but because his disapproving father's recent visit has made him more self-critical" (p. 89). Knowing the context in which a person is motivated to write, compose music or pursue any other creative activity is, therefore, crucial to the understanding of the nature of motivation, i.e. how and when it manifests itself, and under what circumstances its level is diminished or increased.

In order to better understand the nature of motivation it is important to study it holistically. In this regard, my thinking converges with humanistic psychologists, who view a person as a “whole” and thus study humans in conjunction with their feelings, thoughts and behaviors (Weiner, 1992) rather than in separated parts (like the current cognitive approaches). In the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Greening, 2007, Bugental, 1964) five postulates are reprinted in its every issue. I will quote the first three of them in their entirety, since they all draw attention to the importance of studying the person holistically, as well as in his/her physical and social environment:

1. Human beings, as human, supersede the sum of their parts. They cannot be reduced to components.
2. Human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology.
3. Human beings are aware and aware of being aware—i.e., they are conscious. Human consciousness always includes an awareness of oneself in the context of other people.

(Greening, np)

Despite the shared principles, I could not locate the literature on the application these postulates to the empirical study of motivation. An exception was a study conducted by Sheldon and Kasser (2001), but it also relied on a type of scale, with the exception that the study participants wrote down their unique goals, rather than were asked to choose from a list of existing ones. The participants were also asked to rate the importance of their goals which then could be coded and counted. Thus, even though the content of the goals mattered to the researchers, they failed to examine the uniqueness of these goals in a greater detail and instead chose to use scale to measure them. Despite my agreement with the principles of the humanistic

psychology, therefore, I did not find their methodology divergent enough from the mainstream cognitive approaches to the study of motivation. I turned for advice to the literature on creativity.

Gruber's and Wallace's (1999) and Gruber's (1981) so-called evolving systems approach has inspired my own approach to the study of motivation. It encompasses the individual's relationships with others (ranging from family to colleagues) and to experiences throughout life that have an impact on their creativity. The approach espouses the form of a case study and has the following attributes: the uniqueness of a creative person, the multidirectional developmental change, and the person under study is herself an evolving system. More specifically, the person is unique and therefore should not be reduced to a fixed set of preexisting dimensions. The person develops because of various causes and in different directions which should be considered. Finally, a person's thinking evolves over time and influences the way he/she perceives reality and expresses their creativity.

Howard Gardner's (1993) study of creative individuals and their sources of creativity over their lifetime, as well as Gruber's (1981) study of Darwin are examples of the application of this approach to the study of creativity. Both authors consider changing emotional states and circumstances in which the individuals have been creative. Their aim is to "...understand the ebb and flow of creative activity over the course of a productive human life" (Gardner, 1993, p. 23).

Gardner introduced a helpful set of factors which I incorporated in my study of the acoustic musician's motivation. In his analysis of creative individuals, he based his framework on three relationships: between the artist as a child and his master, between the artist and his environment (personal and professional), and his relationship to his creative work.

Let me elaborate on the importance of these relationships in a greater detail. Within "childhood experiences," Gardner examines the relationships between the child (the future artist)

and their master (or masters). It is important to examine this relationship because it provides information on how the master's knowledge was presented to the child and thus how it shaped the child's worldview and future choices (e.g. the artist's values, priorities, attitudes towards arts, etc). Furthermore, the master may provide the child with a number of models or influences, or he himself may serve as a model or influence for the child.

The environment encompasses the relationship between the artist and others around them. Although artists are often thought of as isolated individuals, they are, according to Gardner, influenced first by family and teachers and then by friends and colleagues. It is important to examine the artist's environment to find out how much their creative work depends on or is stimulated by the environment around them.

Finally, Gardner examines the relationship between the artist and the art works they create. While artists are influenced to a great extent by their models/influences as well as their close environment (i.e. family, friends or colleagues), they tend to appropriate or accommodate their knowledge into their work and their own identity as creative individuals, rather than copy something exactly as they were taught by their masters or colleagues. The process of how and why artists appropriate some elements of models/influences or their environment, rather than simply copy them, is interesting because it provides information on the artist's creativity as well as about their motivation to come up with their own way of creating art.

While Gardner examined creativity over the individuals' lifetimes, and the individuals that have been the focus of the study were deceased at the time when the analysis of their lives and works was conducted, my wish was to study motivation of a living individual and thus be able to observe it as it "ebbs and flows" in his life. I wanted to interact with him, ask questions,

and observe him in his environment. In the following section, I will explain the methodology developed for the study in a greater detail.

Methodology

In his discussion of the goals of basic research, which aims at contributing to knowledge in a given field, Patton (2002) points out that different disciplines aim at answering different fundamental questions. While anthropology's goal is to answer the question of "what is the nature of culture," psychology deals with questions of "how do humans behave, think, feel and know" and "why they behave as they do" (p. 216). While the two questions in the domain of psychology may come up during my investigation, my overall aim is to describe the nature of a phenomenon.

Since my question was about the nature of motivation, I have examined motivation of the acoustic musician with the use of qualitative methodology. It was an ethnographic case study, which enabled me to look at the artist's life more holistically. Rather than measuring his level of motivation, I could find out what motivated him to pursue his art and in what context his motivation, along with other factors, occurred.

A case study has enabled me to focus on what Merriam (1998) calls a "... single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). My "unit" was a single person, an acoustic guitar player whose motivation to compose and perform music I want to describe.

Research Relationship

In general, I find it beneficial to be an artist myself, because that gives me an understanding of the issues that are important to artists' motivation. I can relate to some of the

experiences which, I believe, help sustain my motivation to write, such as the enjoyment of the writing process, feedback from others, etc

At the same time, however, I do not wish to impose my beliefs or experiences on my study participant. As Glesne (2006) points out “asking yourself how your proposed research intersects with your life history and whether you are setting out to prove something that you already believe to be true helps to test your emotional attachment to particular outcomes” (23). The fact that I do not know how to play the guitar has forced me to ask him the very basic questions about motivation to compose and perform his musical compositions and not take anything for granted.

I also have to mention that the musician has been my partner for over a decade. This relationship, too have advantages and disadvantages when it comes to research. On the one hand, being close to someone may prevent me from seeing somebody’s faults. On the other hand, such a close relationship may be a way of obtaining an in-depth perspective. As Tillman-Healy suggests, “Friendship as method can bring us to a level of understanding and depth of experience we may be unable to reach using only traditional methods.(p. 737). Thus, in addition to conducting open-ended interviews that generated emic and etic code analysis, I had the opportunity to be present at Victor’s music performances, practice, recording sessions, and other events that have shaped his motivation to compose and perform acoustic music.

In Search of Novelty, Excitement and Independence (Lviv, Ukraine, late 1980s)

Imagine an old, beautiful building. Its solid and aesthetically pleasing structure illustrates the grandeur of architecture of the Austrian Empire, i.e. the time before the Great War. Now, in the end of 1980’s, the building has lost some of its visual appeal—it was not well preserved

during the Soviet era. In a strange twist of fate, it became a boarding school for the blind, and thus its visual beauty was further ignored by its many inhabitants.

If you come inside and go upstairs, you will enter the boys' bedroom, shared by 15-20 boys. Two of them, Victor and his friend, enjoy creating music together. Victor plays the guitar and his friend the drums. Even though they are self-taught, they must play well enough to be asked repeatedly to perform at school's ceremonies and celebrations.

Like all other teenagers, they love listening to music. In their case it is rock.

“Was that why you began playing the guitar? Did you want to play like these rock musicians” I ask Victor as he recalls his Lviv years to me.

“Strangely enough I never tried to reproduce anything.”

“What would be the connection then between listening to rock music and guitar then?” I ask, perplexed.

“The only connection would be that listening to rock music was a new experience, which triggered curiosity.”

Shortly afterwards another new experience triggers curiosity to explore the new territory. A “cool and young” teacher, as Victor referred to her, comes to the school and teaches the students to play various instruments, classical guitar among them. Victor begins to study classical guitar with her, but that is merely an event that would steer his curiosity and attention towards a much broader realm of acoustic music of different genres that he'd explore in the years to come. Here is how Victor remembers the experience: “She [the teacher] showed me ‘Summertime.’ I already heard it at that time but it was cool to learn to play it on the guitar. I liked the cord structure. It was obviously new. It was new area of music altogether.”

Bravery

Thank you, anthropology, for the invention of etic codes, i.e. those that are established from the viewpoint of the researcher, rather than the study participant. Since Victor describes what he has done very matter-of-factly. He has been playing the guitar for four years now, and a well-known musician is coming to the school for the blind to perform. As Victor recalls, “he came to school and he gave a concert and that’s when I came up to him and said I also wrote music, would he be interested in looking at it.”

“Didn’t you really consider it brave?” I ask, “After all, you were just a teenager, learning to play the guitar, still not out of high school, and he was the famous, busy person who came to school as a sign of gratitude—some students helped him in a campaign—his career could have gone undisturbed with or without him coming to the school.

“Yeah. It’s the first step. Once you make the first step, you can’t back out.”

Some time later, the poet-musician gets back to Victor and suggests he takes part in music festivals which have attracted a wide audience after Ukraine became independent in 1991. At one festival Victor is named the “discovery of the festival,” the new talent, so to speak, and he gets second place at another festival, in the category of acoustic music.

Renaissance has got it all in abundance: Environment and Feedback (Lviv, 1991-1994)

Now imagine a cozy café that has just recently been renovated. It is new but its interior has not been reduced to the overbearing influences of cheapest Western trends, such as plastic finish on the walls or counters and too much bright, obtrusive lighting. Instead, the dark blue walls and small lamps and tables emanate the velvety feeling of a joyous comfort. Poets and musicians (Victor being no exception) exchange ideas and energy that settled in after the

independence of Ukraine. Finally, after decades of living under the cultural influence and pressure of the Soviet Union, it was possible to freely express oneself in the Ukrainian language.

For the clarity of themes, I present Victor's reflections on that period in verse. The first strophe talks about the Renaissance and why he thinks it was such a good time for musicians and poets to create their art, then he reflects on being a part of the movement of artists, and finally he acknowledges the importance of giving something back or contributing to the movement that one is a part of:

It was Renaissance in Ukrainian poetry and literature
And of course because a lot of artists from the 80s or 70s
they really didn't have a chance for their art to be appreciated.
Whereas lots of new young kids who were writing and composing ...
it was a good time because it was really cool.
OK, you didn't earn money on it, but it didn't really matter.

What really mattered was that you had a whole movement.
People were just going to the concerts just for the heck of being there.
Not necessarily because they liked the music.
I myself went to couple of poetry evenings. I don't like to listen to poetry a lot, especially to a more complex one—it just puts too much strain on my ears.
I rather enjoy reading poetry quietly to myself.
But you'd go to these events for the sake of meeting people and just saying to somebody
“Oh, I just went to this poetry evening by Neborak

[a well-known Ukrainian poet] or somebody like him.”

So it was this whole movement of just being a part of,
participating as much as you could...

I guess this whole thing probably created something that... made you want to compose,
because obviously that was a part of your contribution.

I don't think that at the moment of writing the actual song that's what I thought,

“Oh, let me write this song so I can contribute.”

But I think maybe subconsciously,

Maybe that's why... a lot of my good songs were born at that time.

In addition to being a part of the movement and being stimulated by it to compose music, the “old themes” of independence and the search for novelty and excitement are retained. With regard to the latter theme, he says: “It was an exciting period because I was surrounded by so many poets, and, for a guy from the school for the blind, where you spend many years in big isolation, not being exposed to anything, this sudden exposure to so many new things, lots of cool sighted friends, going to the university, being part of that whole thing, was very exciting”

Having contact with so many new people also exposes him to new music. When Ukraine belonged to the Soviet Union, not much of Western music has infiltrated into the Ukrainian radio stations and the school for the blind was no exception. Suddenly, Victor listens to Sting and Pat Matheny, two musicians who will have a great influence on his music in the years to come. As has been the case with listening to rock music back at the school for the blind, he does not strive to copy them. Rather, he listens to these musicians to see what is possible. For him, they are not

the absolute masters of knowledge in music, but gatekeepers to the new realm of possibilities in playing and arranging music. This combination of new and exciting people and music has the power to put way into the background the day-to-day life experiences of living in the university's dormitory that often has no water and generally needs a lot of repairs.

It also strengthened Victor's independence in making decisions about his involvement with music. Despite his mom's initial opposition to his playing the guitar on the grounds that being a musician was not a practical type of career, he decides to pursue it, at least for the time being, while it brings him enjoyment and some money. "I didn't ask for much from them [my parents] so obviously they couldn't ask much from me," he reflects. "And the fact that I was adapted, whether you like it or not, it does weaken some of the bonds. I'm sure if my parents would bring me up there could be stronger bond which makes both sides kind of expect something. I didn't expect anything from them and they didn't from me. They adapted me and that was a good thing but they could not tell me 'we brought you up and now you have to give something back'"

"Don't make me sound so ungrateful!" he tells me after I show him the manuscript to verify the accuracy of events and the clarity of quotes. Thus, I hasten to add what may not have been clear in the text above: Victor was adopted at the age of fourteen and had spent most of the school years in the boarding school for the blind (with the exception of summer vacations which he usually spent with his adaptive parents). He then stayed in the dormitory when he attended the university. Thus, when he talks about a "weaker bond with his parents" it is not because he does not respect them, but for the simple reason that he did not spend a lot of time with them, compared to other children when they grow up in their families.

Surrounded by friends and the feeling of independence (financial and one with regard to family expectations), he records his first album and leaves for the US in search of something new and exciting—the world of computers.

In Search of different Novelty and Excitement (Philadelphia, PA, 1994-2001)

If this period of Victor's life would have to be summarized in only one word, it would have to be "computers." It was, he points out, "an interesting period because it was computers, new excitement." Not only was the guitar in the background of his life in Philly, but also in Ukraine where he stayed for a year and a half (1995-97). During that particular time period, the Renaissance period for the arts in Lviv comes to an end—a lot of poets and musicians are scattered in other cities of Ukraine or abroad, mostly in search of money to make a living. This shows how strong an influence the stimulating environment has had on Victor's ability to compose and perform music.

Of course, it is not to say that he abandons the guitar altogether, but he no longer practices everyday because of his programming assignments that take an unpredictable amount of time to finish. I must add that I have shared the life with Victor for most of this period and onwards, so our experiences from then on are shared as well.

Overpowered by emotions (Poznan, Poland, 2001-2003)

Look at the apartment—it's modern and comfortable. It has burgundy and vanilla colored walls and minimalist paintings hanging in the living room and in the hallway. It's a comfortable and yet a sad place, since it is often filled with uncomfortable silence of two adults not talking for a couple of days or with screams and accusations. It is not us—it is my family with whom we

live. For us, this type of behavior is so alien that it stops our lives for a bit in bewilderment:

“How is it possible to live like that?” We wonder.

“The period in Poland was the most stagnant one, which is really so weird, because supposedly it should have been the best of the periods. There was so much free time! And if not the situation that we had back there, at home... Yea, seriously, potentially, it could have been one of the better times, close to something what I had experienced in Ukraine. I try not to think about it too much because I don't want to feel disappointed and think how it could have been. I do come back to it in my mind oftentimes thinking that he time could have been used so much more productively. I had so much free time on my hands!”

The power of negative emotions speaks for itself: it is so overwhelming that motivation to compose music has no chance to survive. There are performances scattered here and there, but they are mostly of music composed in Ukraine and in Philly. What a contrast this period is to the one in Ukraine, where Victor lived in an old dormitory, but was surrounded by positive emotions of help and support, rather than quarrels and silences.

Towards environment and feedback, as well as novelty and excitement! Arlington (2003-2005)

Look inside the cheerful coffee shop. It is packed—we are told nobody else brought such a big crowd of listeners to this tiny place. Wine, coffee, and conversation mingle with soothing sounds of bossa nova. If you look closer, you will see that Victor plays the guitar, while another musician plays on the percussion and another one wonderfully on the flute. I wish this went on for ever. Victor says that in Arlington his ability to play the guitar matched the level of playing back in Ukraine, before his excitement about computers has temporarily overshadowed his motivation to play music.

It is ironic that Victor became interested in bossa nova at the time. The word “bossa,” Ruy Castro informs us in his story of bossa nova and its followers, has existed before the bossa nova music movement in Brazil itself. If a musician was described as “bossa,” Castro tells us, it simply meant that he or she was singing or playing differently from his/her contemporaries. Thus, in a way, the whole environment in Arlington can be thought of as “bossa,” as something utterly new from what it was in Poland and, frankly, in Philly where computers reigned. It cannot be compared with the vibrant scene of Lviv in the beginning of 1990s, I think partly because Ukraine went through a lot of exciting changes at the time, while Arlington’s only changes are its new coffee houses and more new homes built. Also, we live there for only a year and a half.

Bossa nova is exciting because of its “cord structure.” However, the excitement about it is “temporary.” As Victor explains, “I don’t think it excites me anymore because I think I pretty much learned the cord structure and that’s pretty much it. I can take it for what it’s worth, But that’s it. I can’t go further.”

Regaining Independence Palo Alto, CA

We did go further, to the West Coast, because of Victor’s job in the Bay area.

Imagine us now sitting at a kitchen table talking and sipping latte:

“Do you have any plans with regard to your music?” I ask

“Finishing an album would be a good thing to see what’s possible and whether it’s possible and I’m eager to see once it’s finished, what’s it will feel like. Once I’m done, am I going to say ‘finally I’m done.’ Maybe it’s one of these things that haunts you and once you’re done with the idea, it’s no longer exciting.”

“How did you feel after your first album?” I ask, knowing that he left Lviv to study in the US as soon as the album was finished.

“It was done in a rush. A lot of the tapes were sold without me being there. So it’s an interesting question. I don’t think I was terribly proud of the quality of the recording. Many people told me how much they liked it, but it’s not the same when you sell and present the album, you get a fresh perspective—I didn’t get any of that.”

I must add that he now has enough material for two CDs one instrumental and one with my lyrics. He has been slowly recording one of them over the internet with other musicians. Most of the pieces have been composed either in Arlington or in California. Also, he has now surpassed his level of playing the guitar in Ukraine.

Emerging issues

Based on the presentation of findings from the time Victor began to play the guitar until his recording of the second album, I wish to point out to two dualities that have emerged. They have been shown in Victor’s actions and in various contexts in the vignettes, but it is worth pointing them out as important themes that run through all the periods of Victor’s life presented above and that remain unresolved.

The first tension that has emerged is between Victor’s enjoyment of the process of playing the guitar and the need to receive feedback. Thus, he spends countless hours composing, arranging, and recording a piece of music, but points out that “you need to get a reaction to your playing. for me, feedback has to be a result of something that I’m doing.”

The other tension is between his great value that he attaches to music and at the same time realizes that he likes other things, such as computers, equally. Thus, with regard to the value

of music, he says, “At the time of creation it’s definitely something that you keep close to your heart or to your mind at least, in your mind’s eye, so to speak. whenever I play I feel really good about it [his most valued musical compositions].” On the other hand, he enjoys working with computers and says that he could not admit that music is the only thing in his life that he enjoys doing.

As I mentioned, these issues are interesting because they are unresolved and neither I nor Victor think that they have any easy solutions. However, I do believe that the awareness of the existence of these issues, which has fully emerged during the interviews for the study, is an important outcome.

Conclusions

The goal of my study was to show how important it is to examine motivation in the natural setting or in the particular context of one’s circumstances at any given points in their lives. For instance, while bravery was a characteristic that I identified early on in Victor’s life as a necessary characteristic for him to succeed, it was not a necessary trait any time later in the study.

Moreover, even though it is possible to point to certain elements that are always present in the motivation to compose and perform music, e.g. the search for novelty and excitement or the value that Victor attaches to music, there are other elements that can have positive influence on motivation, e.g. the presence of a supportive environment and feedback, as well as negative influences, e.g. the emotional impact of the closest environment.

I hope that the present study is not viewed as a definitive source of information on the motivation of creative individuals. Rather, my intention has been to illustrate the complexity of

the nature of motivation and its dependence on the emotional, social and cultural environment of the individual.

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