

Review of the book *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*

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[Paul J. Silvia](#) (2007). Review of the book *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 1(4), 254–255. doi: [10.1037/1931-3896.1.4.254](https://doi.org/10.1037/1931-3896.1.4.254)

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Abstract:

Reviews the book, *Group genius: The creative power of collaboration* by K. Sawyer (2007). This book is written for a popular audience. It takes several themes from the author's past work on the sociocultural approach to creativity, particularly his research on improvisation and his book *Explaining creativity*, and develops them into an innovative analysis of improvisation and collaboration. The message of this book is that creative ideas emerge from collaborative webs, not from the minds of lone creators. Sawyer proposes that creative teams and organizations have moved beyond conventional notions of innovation--isolated Research and Development departments, for example--and instead harness collaborative webs. These webs include obvious ones, such as collaboration within the organization, as well as surprising ones, such as collaboration with consumers and with competitors. Researchers in the psychology of creativity will find a lot of food for thought in this book. The reviewer notes, however, that little attention is given to individual differences. This omission will madden many researchers. Researchers will also find a nascent integration of the sociocultural approach and the cognitive approach. Criticisms aside, he suggests that Keith Sawyer is one of psychology's finest writers: his books have a graceful tone and an understated erudition. The distinction between content and form is specious--writing unifies "what" and "how"--but creativity researchers will get as much out of this book's "how" as its "what".

Keywords: cooperation | creativity | organizations | social groups | teams | psychology

Article:

Scientific psychologists have an uneasy relationship with their public, also known as normal people, nonpsychologists, and those people on airplanes who assume I'm a clinical psychologist although I really study prairie voles. We would like more respect from the public; we would like people to understand what the science of psychology is like. But we don't want to tell them; they need to figure it out without our help. Scientific psychologists write surprisingly few books for the public, relative to the number of scientists and the level of popular interest in psychological

topics. The science bestseller lists have books about math, geology, evolutionary biology, cosmology, economics, and geography; psychology appears there, but it ought to crush the other sciences. After all, we are cooler than population geography—there's research on that, I think.

The problem stems from the prejudice that scientists have against popular writing. Why do we assume that a book for the public is a simpler, less rigorous form of what we usually write? Must writing for the public require diminishing what we do? Writing for a general audience is hard. Academic journals have low standards for style, clarity, and interestingness; the general public expects better, and they vote with their dollars. One suspects that our moms' advice about playground bullies was right: they pick on us because they're jealous. Perhaps the tide is shifting, given the arrival of some excellent popular books (e.g., Gilbert, 2006) and books about how to write for popular audiences (e.g., Kendall-Tackett, 2007).

Against this backdrop we find Keith Sawyer's (2007) latest book, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*, which is written for a popular audience and published by Basic Books. The readers of this journal will know Sawyer from his past work on the sociocultural approach to creativity, particularly his research on improvisation (Sawyer, 2003) and his book *Explaining Creativity* (Sawyer, 2006). *Group Genius* takes several themes from his past work and develops them into an innovative analysis of improvisation and collaboration. The message of this book is that creative ideas emerge from collaborative webs, not from the minds of lone creators. Sawyer proposes that creative teams and organizations have moved beyond conventional notions of innovation—isolated Research and Development departments, for example—and instead harness collaborative webs. These webs include obvious ones, such as collaboration within the organization, as well as surprising ones, such as collaboration with consumers and with competitors.

The strength of this book is its moderation. Some popular books on creativity and innovation descend into hyperbolic hysteria—all work will be open source; all innovation will come from consumers; all intellectual property will vanish. In contrast, Sawyer emphasizes conditions that foster and hinder successful innovation. In describing the value of improvisation, for example, he identifies conditions that must be met for improvisation to yield creative ideas. When describing brainstorming, he identifies features of groups and tasks that foster innovation. Throughout the book, Sawyer emphasizes that the process of collaborative creativity can be inefficient, sprawling, and frustrating. The secret to innovation, he suggests, is to “fail often, fail early, fail gloriously” (p. 178).

Researchers in the psychology of creativity will find a lot of food for thought in this book. Like *Explaining Creativity*, *Group Genius* gives little attention to individual differences. This omission will madden many researchers—the psychometric tradition is alive and well—but it will spark some hard questions, too. Do we need individual differences to understand innovation on a societal level? If creativity emerges from social networks, not from individual minds, is it necessary to measure differences between people? If Sawyer's analysis is right, are the individual

differences worth studying—the ability to learn from failure, to work with others, and to improvise—being eclipsed by the study of divergent thinking?

Researchers will also find a nascent integration of the sociocultural approach and the cognitive approach. In Chapters 5 and 6, Sawyer makes a case for the inherently collaborative character of insight and creative problem-solving, two domains typically associated with cognitive psychology. Knowledge and concepts are embedded in a social world and a shared language. When people incubate ideas or transfer knowledge, they bring to bear knowledge and strategies that they have learned from other people. (I would add that the cognitive psychology lab is the only place where people solve insight and divergent thinking problems by themselves. Most participants would prefer to tackle these problems collaboratively with their friends.) The convergence is incomplete, but Sawyer's analysis could spark attempts to unify the sociocultural and cognitive traditions, two areas that seem to be growing apart (Silvia, 2007).

Book reviewers shouldn't simply say that they liked a book—readers don't care, and they find mean reviews more fun to read. But for what my opinion is worth, Keith Sawyer is one of psychology's finest writers: his books have a graceful tone and an understated erudition. The distinction between content and form is specious—writing unifies *what* and *how*—but creativity researchers will get as much out of this book's *how* as its *what*.

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