JoE

Uniqueness in Creative Expertise: Considering Friedlander's *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise*

Journal of Expertise
2025. Vol. 8(4)

ISSN 2573-2773

Anna Abraham

Torrance Center for Creativity and Department of Educational Psychology, Mary Frances Early College of Education, University of Georgia, USA

Correspondence: Anna Abraham, anna.abraham@uga.edu

In Stefan Zweig's final novella, *Chess Story* (2005; originally published in 1941), the reader is introduced to two chess experts who are completely dissimilar in every way possible. One of the players finds his interest in chess ignited by chance in childhood, and, in a space of very little time, he shows prodigious ability in the game. He goes on to become a grandmaster, which earns him public accolades. But, in every other way, he cuts a somewhat uninspiring figure. Even when it comes to chess, he is mechanical, unimaginative, and virtually machinal in the way he approaches the game. The other chess expert comes from a privileged background, but he comes to chess in adulthood when he is imprisoned by the Gestapo and is trapped in a place where he lacks any kind of mental stimulation. As he slowly loses his sense of self, he one day happens upon a book of chess, which becomes a salve for his mind. By closely studying the games in the book, he teaches himself how to play the game to the highest standards of excellence. And, in compulsively pushing his imagination to fully construct the chess board in his mind and play games against himself, he cultivates a level of mastery that is truly extraordinary. While he is not a recognized chess grandmaster, there is no question that his ability falls within a qualitatively distinct realm of expertise, one that is creative and uniquely imaginative.

I begin this commentary with this story to illustrate an enormous challenge that is inherent in the study of expertise. In her commendable book, Kathryn Friedlander (2024) illustrates how the bulk of efforts in this field of study zone in on that which is generalizable across experts within a specific domain of practice (e.g., music, chess, science). However, there is no one way to be an expert or to develop expertise, even within the same domain of practice. What's more, individuality is a key feature of any expert's expertise. Indeed, what sets experts apart is what makes each of them distinctive.

The dominant approach in the field of expertise—to simplify across theoretical models and types of practices within a domain so that they fit neatly into a single continuum—may serve to provide tidy take-home-messages. However, this practice often comes at the cost of ignoring critical facets about expertise and can even be misleading. For instance, in the context of music (Friedlander, 2024, p. 141), when applying the levels of expertise model (ranging from the lowest level, "naïve," to the highest level, "master"), the descriptors for each level between these two extremes refer only to the accrual of formal skills and accolades in musical *performance*. The highest rung of "master" level, however, features new types of musical expertise, such as composing. However, it is not necessary that a composer also be an expert musician who has performed with recognized orchestras. In fact, each type of musical expertise (e.g., performance, improvisation, composition, critique) is its own broad domain, each with its own trajectories and

considerations for what constitutes achievement and excellence.

Within the field of expertise, the penchant for assessing the readily quantifiable when determining levels of proficiency is also evidenced by the amount of focus dedicated to assessing whether the idea of the 10-year (or 10,000-hour) rule (Ericsson & Ward, 2007) to developing mastery applies to particular domains or to particular achievers. This has unfortunately meant that little research has been devoted to understanding the dynamics between deliberate practice and performance and the specific parameters therein that shape ability, or indeed the types of informal, subjective, and personalized practices that occupy the mind and the body when one strives to build expertise. Person-centered factors, such as the drive to create (Flaherty, 2004), and the capacity to persevere towards excellence over time despite failure, lack of recognition, and other negative outcomes, are naturally much more challenging to study, but they must be reckoned with as they are critical to the building of expertise and the achievement of mastery.

At mastery-levels of expertise in any given field, the drive to excel and achieve is inextricably bound up with a person's individuality and their unique skillsets, as well as their appetite for continued learning to further hone their skills. The importance of such factors are attested to within first-person accounts of high achievers, such as the chess prodigy and martial arts champion, Josh Waitzkin:

> At the highest levels of any kind of competitive discipline, everyone is great. At this point the decisive factor is rarely who knows more, but who dictates the tone of the battle. For this reason, almost without exception, champions are specialists whose styles emerge from profound awareness of their unique strengths, and who are exceedingly skilled at guiding the battle in that direction (Waitzkin, 2007, p. 226).

This raises interesting considerations about the need to take into account interpersonal as well as intrapersonal factors when it comes to mastery in domains where achievement is tied to successful performance against an opponent (e.g., games, sports). In such contexts, one's own level of expertise is not the only determinant of how creatively one will perform on any given day; the level of expertise of the opponent, and one's awareness of the intricacies of their game play, also matter.

This means that the parallels and distinctions between the psychology of creative performance versus non-creative performance, as well as the psychology of creative expertise versus non-creative expertise, will differ greatly depending on the domain in question. A coherent picture can emerge only with a thorough examination of the definition of creativity (Pope, 2005) and the explicit consideration of how a chosen definition relates to a given domain, enabling relevant specific questions that will take that particular field further (e.g., What constitutes a creative move in the context of chess-playing and why? Does creativity in chess-playing apply only at the levels of expert and master proficiencies? Does a master chess player use creative moves when playing anyone at lower levels of proficiency? What are the factors that make some master chess players more creative than others?).

There is no expertise without training, and the automation of skill training, which the field of chess-playing has been familiar with for many decades, is now spreading to several other fields in the current "Age of AI." The strengths and drawbacks of training one's expertise against an algorithm versus a person has been pointed out by chess experts, with the negative effects largely centered on the cultivation of individual subjective sensibilities, such as intuitive, aesthetic, imaginative, and creative aspects of chess expertise (Roeder, 2023; Kasparov and Greengard, 2017; Roeder, 2022; Wilkenfeld, 2019). The minds of chess players today are, as a consequence, different from those of the chess players of yesteryear. The field of performance and expertise will need to reckon with how present-day Generative AI tools, which are ubiquitous and widely used for generating linguistic output (and increasingly also for scientific research), will impact the cultivation of

expertise. As the outsourcing of cognitive skills directly impinges on targeted skill development, the rethinking of what it means to be proficient seems inevitable, and with it our understanding of what mastery actually entails.

ORCID iD

Anna Abraham
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4954-8205

References

Ericsson, K. A., & Ward, P. (2007). Capturing the naturally occurring superior performance of experts in the laboratory: Toward a science of expert and exceptional performance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 16*(6), 346–350. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00533.x

Flaherty, A. (2004). *The midnight disease: The drive to write, writer's block, and the creative brain*. Houghton Mifflin.

Friedlander, K. J. (2024). *The psychology of creative performance and expertise*. Routledge.

Kasparov, G., & Greengard, M. (2017). *Deep thinking: Where machine intelligence ends and human creativity begins*. PublicAffairs.

Pope, R. (2005). *Creativity: Theory, history, practice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203695319

Roeder, O. (2022, January 28). Have chess computers destroyed the game? *Big Think* https://bigthink.com/high-culture/chess-computers/

Roeder, O. (2023). *Seven games: A human history*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Waitzkin, J. (2007). *The art of learning: An inner journey to optimal performance*. Free Press.

Wilkenfeld, Y. (2019). Can chess survive artificial intelligence? *The New Atlantis.* https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/can-chess-survive-artificial-intelligence

Zweig, S. (2005). *Chess story*. New York Review Books Classics.

Received: 19 December 2025
Accepted: 20 December 2025