

An Asymmetrical Partnership: Commentary on Kathryn Friedlander's *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise*

Aaron Kozbelt

Department of Psychology, Brooklyn College, City College of New York, USA

Correspondence: Aaron Kozbelt, AaronK@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Kathryn Friedlander's *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* (2024) is a most welcome addition to the psychological literature. Overtly intended as a textbook, it succeeds marvelously in that capacity. It is comprehensive, clear, and pedagogy-friendly, with each chapter bookended by initial learning outcomes and concluding challenge questions. It is also easy to navigate, with a sensible tripartite organization: initial topical orientation, a central octet of domain-specific chapters, and a final section on factors facilitating versus handicapping performance. Overall, the volume is a gold mine of classic and current theoretical and empirical references, which reflect the expansive and inclusive qualities of contemporary research—both in terms of examining traditionally peripheralized domains, plus extensive coverage of more “personal” topics such as sensory sensitivity and performance anxiety in the book's closing third.

From the standpoint of scientific progress, Friedlander's book raises pressing questions on the theoretical and practical relations between expertise and creativity—and the extent to which they may or may not be destined for some convergent synthesis. Since my own research awkwardly straddles both areas, it is gratifying to see a highly capable scholar addressing this problematic overlap. Both expertise and creativity deal with humanity at our performative best. Historically, however, the two became entrenched as conceptual opposites:

Expertise was framed as superior reproducible performance on well-defined domain-specific tasks, whereas creativity has long been associated with generating novel and valuable solutions to problems so ill-defined that they can seem invisible. Research frameworks and communities remain largely siloed, with few attempts at integration (some exceptions: Kaufman, 2013; Kozbelt, 2008a; Simonton, 2014; Subotnik et al., 2011). Arguably, both domains paid a price for this entrenchment, delaying the adoption of complementary insights and methods that might move their respective fields forward—and potentially closer together.

However, achieving a meaningful synthesis has proven difficult. Throughout Friedlander's book, expertise is the more consistent theme, present from beginning to end. Creativity emerges only in the third chapter, thereafter rearing its head regularly toward the ends of the domain-specific chapters—usually via the framework of Sternberg et al.'s (2001) largely descriptive propulsion typology of creativity—and making few appearances thereafter. This is hardly a damning critique. It merely echoes, I think, the way that these two research enterprises have fared in recent years.

I have witnessed some of this dynamic firsthand. For instance, as a co-editor of two editions of *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Ericsson et al., 2018; Williams et al., forthcoming) I have seen, almost in real time, how expertise research

has evolved, moving beyond classic deliberate-practice orthodoxy to encompass previously neglected domains and perspectives. This includes forging stronger incipient connections with topics such as creativity and talent development. Some of this torch-passing is surely due to the lamentable passing of Anders Ericsson in 2020. But these new emphases are welcome, as they seem necessary components of any rich accounting of human high performance (see, e.g., Preckel et al., 2020).

In contrast, despite some lip service to the importance of expertise, in my estimation creativity research has not systematically moved in a comparable or compatible direction—that is, toward a more thorough integration with expertise studies. My impression is that these days most creativity researchers are simply more concerned with other matters.

This misalignment is unfortunate, because answers to important questions hinge on the relations between expert knowledge and creative productivity. For instance, is creativity better regarded as fundamentally domain-general or domain-specific? To the extent that creativity is rooted in domain-specific principles (see Baer, 2012), the study of domain-specific expertise and talent development will be crucial for a thorough understanding and meaningful real-world application.

Relatedly, and perhaps more importantly, what is the optimal amount of expert knowledge to facilitate high creativity? It might seem reasonable to expect a monotonic positive relation between the two: the more of one, the more of the other. However, persistent cautionary anecdotes of uncreative old pedants and potentially inhibiting psychological factors (such as reduced latent inhibition, functional fixedness, and automatization) complicate the picture. To her credit, Friedlander addresses these issues directly at the end of her third chapter—the closest the book comes to a sense of synthesis of its two titular topics—but a substantive conclusion remains elusive.

Personally, I am unpersuaded by the assertion that can one know “too much” to be creative. Here I am reminded of old arguments about “forgetting what you know” as the key to

realistic drawing skill. This bottom-up view was debunked by the great art historian E. H. Gombrich (1960), who persuasively argued that *more knowledge*—appropriately and schematically deployed—was the path to greater artistic achievement (see Kozbelt & Ostrofsky, 2018). Familiar caveats aside, I suspect something similar generally operates within the nexus of creative expertise. Even supposing there were deleterious effects of “excessive” expert knowledge, would that be due to the interfering effects of knowledge (domain-specific content versus general or idiosyncratic knowledge) *per se*, or to the processes applied to that knowledge, or other information processing parameters? (These options are very different psychologically.) I should also point out that variation in lifespan creativity trajectories represents another way of informing this issue (see Kozbelt, 2008a; Simonton, 1991)—in particular, special cases such as persons who make conceptual breakthroughs at young ages (Galenson, 2001), one-hit wonders (Kozbelt, 2008b), or polymaths who make creative contributions to multiple domains (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2022). All of these pose interesting challenges to an expertise-driven view of creativity and are intriguing foci of research (see also Weisberg, 2006).

Finally, worth mentioning is one additional consideration, which is altogether absent from Friedlander’s book and most other research in creativity and (especially) expertise: the role of evolution. Classical conceptions of expertise focused on completely “artificial” domains such as chess—relatively recent human inventions, without which we somehow survived for millennia. This was a sensible initial research strategy, to leverage greater experimental control over the phenomenon under investigation. But some domains recently entering the purview of expertise studies have more “natural qualities.” For instance, realistic drawing partakes of and enhances some of the same visual cognition processes as in everyday scene perception (Kozbelt & Ostrofsky, 2018). Performative aesthetic domains such as dance, music, and storytelling have been implicated as vehicles of Darwinian sexual selection (see

Kozbelt, 2019). Local expert knowledge of flora and fauna (Diamond, 1966) is likewise important as a model for comparing “natural” occurrences of expertise with more “artificial” ones. In sum, the biological versus cultural evolutionary bases of the human capacities undergirding expertise and creativity represent yet more opportunities for meaningful discovery.

On such questions, Friedlander’s book is an important step in the right direction. In mapping out and documenting the progress we have already made in understanding expertise and creativity, she reveals interesting paths as yet untaken, which promise future synergies—if we have the nerve to take up the challenge.

ORCID iD

Aaron Kozbelt

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5259-0573>

References

- Baer, J. (2012). Domain specificity and the limits of creativity theory. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 46, 16–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.002>
- Diamond, J. M. (1966). Zoological classification system of a primitive people. *Science*, 151, 1102–4.
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.151.3714.1102>
- Ericsson, K. A., Hoffman, R. H., Kozbelt, A., & Williams, A. M. (Eds.). (2018). *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Friedlander, K. J. (2024). *The psychology of creative performance and expertise*. Routledge.
- Galenson, D. W. (2001). *Painting outside the lines: Patterns of creativity in modern art*. Harvard University Press.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1960). *Art and illusion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kaufman, S. B. (Ed.) (2013). *The complexity of greatness: Beyond talent or practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Kozbelt, A. (2008a). Longitudinal hit ratios of classical composers: Reconciling “Darwinian” and expertise acquisition perspectives on lifespan creativity. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2, 221–235.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012860>
- Kozbelt, A. (2008b). One-hit wonders in classical music: Evidence and (partial) explanations for an early career peak. *Creativity Research Journal*, 20, 179–195.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10400410802059952>
- Kozbelt, A. (2019). Evolutionary approaches to creativity. In J. C. Kaufman & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of creativity* (2nd ed.) (pp. 109–131). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316979839.008>
- Kozbelt, A., & Ostrofsky, J. (2018). Expertise in drawing. In K. A. Ericsson, R. H. Hoffman, A. Kozbelt, & A. M. Williams (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance* (2nd ed.) (pp. 576–596). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316480748.030>
- Preckel, F., Golle, J., Grabner, R., Jarvin, L., Kozbelt, A., Müllensiefen, D., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., Schneider, W., Subotnik, R., Vock, M., & Worrell, F. C. (2020). Talent development in achievement domains: A psychological framework for within- and cross-domain research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15, 691–722.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619895030>
- Root-Bernstein, M. M., & Root-Bernstein, R. (2022). Polymathy among Nobel laureates as a creative strategy: The qualitative and phenomenological evidence. *Creativity Research Journal*, 35, 1–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2022.2051294>
- Simonton, D. K. (1991). Emergence and realization of genius: The lives and works of 120 classical composers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 829–840.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.61.5.829>
- Simonton, D. K. (2014). Creative performance, expertise acquisition, individual differences, and developmental antecedents: An integrative research agenda. *Intelligence*, 45, 66–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2013.04.007>

- Sternberg, R. J., Kaufman, J. C., & Pretz, J. E. (2001). The propulsion model of creative contributions applied to the arts and letters. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 35, 75-101. <https://doi:10.1002/j.2162-6057.2001.tb01223.x>
- Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Worrell, F. C. (2011). Rethinking giftedness and gifted education: A proposed direction forward based on psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12, 3–54. <https://doi:10.1037/e665862012-001>
- Weisberg, R. W. (2006). *Creativity: Understanding innovation in problem solving, science, invention, and the arts*. Wiley.
- Williams, A. M., Hoffman, R. H., Kozbelt, A., & Preckel, F. (Eds.). (forthcoming). *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.

Received: 15 October 2025

Accepted: 2 November 2025

