

# Enacting Expertise: A Commentary on Kathryn Friedlander's *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise*

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Kathryn Friedlander's book, *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* (2024), is a timely contribution to the study of creative performance and expertise. It provides an authoritative overview and useful framework for understanding the interaction between these two complex phenomena. Early on, Friedlander contrasts the literature on expertise with that on creativity and lays emphasis on the potential paradox of combining these two: If originality is considered the core of creativity and adherence to domain specific rules is an important part of expertise then what constitutes creative expertise? She critically cites the work of Tanenbaum and Simonton as underlying the notion that expertise involves a deep understanding of the boundaries of the domain, while creativity involves bending or breaking them. Rather, she casts creative expertise as requiring a deep understanding of the rules of the game in order to more effectively breach them. We are in support of this notion that moves from Romantic perspectives on creativity as unhampered by knowledge to an understanding that creative performance and expertise is an ongoing socially embedded practice (Ross & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2018; Weisberg, 1986).

This notion of creativity as incremental and habitual is supported by research in scientific discovery showing that to fully understand the power of a creative moment the scientist must

understand the theoretical background of their field (Yaqub, 2018). Similarly, creative practice requires a deep attunement to the domain which is reflected in expertise (Glăveanu et al., 2013; Ross & Groves, 2023). The notion of a lone-wolf, creative genius who stands outside of the rules is one that rarely stands up to scrutiny; rather, creativity is deeply embedded in the domain in which it is practised and draws from that domain while also extending it (Montuori & Purser, 1995; Ross & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2018). Therefore, we agree with Friedlander that a deep-seated expertise in the creative domain is necessary for creative performance; it is not a paradox but rather a prerequisite. We welcome this focus on creative expertise in performance as a way of understanding creativity.

This focus on the embedded nature of creative expertise does indicate a need to understand the underlying skills necessary to enact this expertise, so it is here that we diverge from the emphasis in the current text. In line with many psychological theories of creativity *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise* presents a view of expertise and of creative performance that focuses on the intellectual and the mental. Such an exclusive orientation ignores the now four-decade long history of theories of embodied cognition (see Gallagher, 2023 for a comprehensive and accessible review). It is significant that no terminology like enactive, distributed, situated, or extended (cognition) nor the term 'sensorimotor'

appear in the index. Psychological science is “the study of the mind and behavior.” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Often, however, the focus on behaviour is left out of psychological theories. Yet, to understand creative practice, it seems to be particularly important. Our commentary here focuses on why, for creative performance particularly, we believe there needs to be a focus on embodied and enacted skilled behaviour in the world.

Friedlander does clearly value the importance of “skill” (p.3); however, this skill is considered to be purely mental or intellectual. Friedlander recognises that ‘...most skills are complex, involve hybrid combination of ... coordination of processes...’ rather than simple mental cogitation; however, she does not return to this rich territory toward which she has gestured. We believe that this is a missed opportunity to elaborate on the embodied and choreographed skill that lies behind expertise in the creative domains and artisanal domains (Penny, 2021; Penny & Fisher, 2021). It is this lacuna between creativity, performance, and expertise that we urge those working in the cross over to consider.

According to Johnson and Proctor, we can define skill as “goal-directed, well-organized behavior that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort” (2016, p. 2). And we flag two key points here: In the first place, the action has to be ‘goal-directed’ or purposeful, with a clear target outcome in mind; second, it must be ‘well-organized’, implying that the various processes employed in the task must be fully coordinated. Typically, basic skills involve motor (e.g., dancing, skiing, typing, football), perceptual (e.g., scanning a medical image), or cognitive components (e.g., medical diagnosis, problem-solving, playing chess). In reality, however, most skills are complex and involve a hybrid combination of all three: Think about the coordination of processes required for playing a musical instrument in an orchestra, driving an automobile, performing a surgical operation, or even cooking your evening meal. In addition, such a definition points to organisation on a material plane (Kirsh, 2010) including the skilled use of tools to economise

on effort. These parts of expertise should be more deeply explored.

It is rather telling that the first chapter in Part II – Expertise in *applied* areas concerns ‘chess and other *mind* games’ (our emphasis). We argue that expertise and creative performance are applied across a wide range of human practices that are not discussed in Part II, from driving and cycling to cooking (both professional and amateur), to the wide range of types of expertise traditionally referred to as trades and artisanal and crafts practices, from cabinet making and canoe making and on through plumbing to precision machining (Marchand, 2024; Penny, 2021). Placing the emphasis on the mind risks trapping creative expertise in a narrow range of fields which are amenable to cognitive investigation. A psychological treatment of how creativity is performed should move beyond this.

The second chapter in Part II concerns memory, immediately framing expertise and creativity in terms of the ‘mental’. It is significant that in Chapter 2 the author states that the category ‘procedural memory’ ‘is not a particular focus of this chapter’, since this category might be where embodied knowledge and skills of the materially engaged kind (Malafouris, 2014; Ross & Glăveanu, 2023) might be considered. We would suggest that omitting procedural memory from consideration is making a category error similar to assuming that expertise and creativity cannot co-exist because one is concerned with rules of the domain and the other with breaking them. Procedural memory is often the skill that allows and scaffolds creative expertise.

Similarly, language such as ‘constantly recompiling skills’ (p. 117) both implicitly endorses a computationalist paradigm and mentalises embodied skills. Friedlander does make a brief reference to ‘proprioceptive body awareness’ (p.177) in the training of dancers. In the view of the current authors, ‘proprioceptive body awareness’ is fundamental to the sensorimotor scaffolding of skill cognition in any human embodied practices. On page 275, there are two short paragraphs on ‘motor skills’ but, given that the extended notion of creative

performance and practice requires implementation in the public domain, there is a need to understand what role these motor skills play. On page 336, there is mention of ‘embodied creative engagement’, but only in passing in the context of ‘flow’. The ongoing hylomorphic attitude (Ingold, 2010; Penny & Fisher, 2021) that places mental enactment of performance as more important over the actual performance art restricts greatly the range and potential of the overlap between expertise and creativity. It is expertise that provides an intimate understanding of the constraints of the material and ways of overcoming those constraints. Adherence to the mental supports the ongoing folk notion that creativity is freeing from constraints (Ross et al., 2024; Ross & Glăveanu, 2023), a notion which underlies the supposed paradox between creativity and expertise Friedlander so correctly identifies as flawed.

Overall, we commend Friedlander on her survey of a range of views on creative performance and expertise and wholly appreciate and support the drive to draw two perhaps contradictory research traditions together. It particularly concerns us, however, that the now well-established perspectives of situated, distributed, enactive. and embodied cognition are missing from this overview. In our opinion, these perspectives provide the key to fully understanding the paradox of how novelty in a domain can require expertise.

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