How to Analyze Collaborative Circles: A Guide for Instructors

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I. Literature Review

Overview of the Theory, its Limitations, and this Study Contribution

Among previous studies of creative collaboration, Michael Farrell’s theory of collaborative circles (CCT) is one of the most promising. One of its stronger characteristics is having successfully combined findings, concepts and theories from disparate research areas—experimental social psychology, sociology of deviance, culture, and of the arts—to better understand one general, and fundamental research question: how do small groups collaborate. In some ways, his work goes against the grain of the disciplinary, and intra-disciplinary fragmentation that has resulted in massive amounts of findings so specific they all too often hardly amount to any cumulative knowledge, and are confined to the case/s under analysis.

Specifically, the value of the theory can be further synthesized in the following three points: (1) as “an attempt to map the dynamics of collaborative circles over time so as to derive from it a more general theory of interchange and influence” (DeNora 2003: 912), (2) as an introduction of group theory, and therefore social psychology, to sociology of the arts, and more broadly to the sociology of culture (DeNora 2003; Fine 2003), and (3) as an illustrative example of the importance of comparative research for the generation of theory (DeNora 2003).

This socio-psychological theory of creativity in small groups is inductively developed by Farrell through historical case studies, and presented in the book Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work (2001). By
examining detailed accounts of the formation, growth, and eventual dissolution of a diverse set of successful collaborative circles (the Impressionists, the founders of Psychoanalysis, Nashville’s Fugitive poets, Conrad’s Rye Circle, and Elizabeth Stanton’s Ultras), he is able to extract and articulate the regularities that seemingly enable successful creative collaboration. Farrell notes that the figure of the lone genius is not always accurate. Instead, he recognizes that extraordinary creativity is often the result of successful collaboration among peers who develop an intense friendship and work together on similar projects for an extended period of time. He argues that this work is spurred by a specific set of enabling social dynamics that work to support, encourage, and spur creativity among members of the circle. And he also argues that these groups typically evolve through a series of relatively well-defined stages (ranging from formation to separation and nostalgic reunion), each with its own characteristic dynamics (Farrell 2001).

Although the theory has been considered as an important advancement in the sociology of creativity (Parker and Hackett 2012; Collins 2004; DeNora 2003; Fine 2003), it retains significant shortcomings. The clearest weakness is that it focuses too narrowly on the interpersonal dynamics among group members, while paying less attention to the context within which they operate (McLaughlin 2008)—in CCT the “magnet place”. Also power dynamics between the group and other individuals, groups or institutions in the social arena in which they vie for attention, and how they shape group behavior and creativity have been insufficiently considered (Collins 2004; Parker and Hackett 2012). Third, we lack understanding of the causal mechanisms that mediate between stages and between the group and the social arena it attempts to transform via its creative work (Farrell 2008). Fourth, the ways in which the various types of resources shape group growth and performance is lacking.
With my work (Corte 2013) I began to reveal a better understanding of this fourth point.

This paper builds on Farrell’s research through an ethnographic investigation of a group of Freestyle BMX cycling riders in Greenville, North Carolina to better understand the interplay between the social psychological dynamics of CCT and contextual factors—in other words, where collaborative circles develop.

The members of this circle remain among some of the most successful riders in the history of Freestyle BMX and, through their ambition and technical advancement, ushered this subcultural activity into its era of commercialization and partial professionalization. Currently, CCT does not adequately account for the contextual factors that enable or constrain collective endeavour of the kind that collaborative circles are pursuing. On the other hand, research in social movements has developed analytical tools to investigate the ecological context of collective action, with particular emphasis on the resources that individuals need to mobilize towards their goals (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Thus, in order to address some of the shortcomings of Farrell’s theory, I borrow the nuanced conception of resources developed by scholars of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977), as well as selected findings from this literature, and integrate them into CCT through a “theoretical extension” (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003). This is just one of the ways through which researchers can contribute to theory-building. Note that extension entails the application of theories or analytical devices that have been originally developed in the context of some specific class of phenomena to the study of another, thereby demonstrating the versatility of
these theories, and potentially unveiling new or underemphasized aspects of these theories (Corte 2012; Snow 2004).

II. Glossary Defining Theoretical Terms

**Collaborative circles:** a primary group consisting of peers who share similar occupational goals and who, through long periods of dialogue and collaboration, negotiate a common vision that guides their work.

**Instrumental intimacy:** a type of exchange between dyads of the group denoted by trust, mutual support, and free transfer of ideas, resulting from deep knowledge of one another acquired through long and persistent interaction. In this state members are often able to predict comments from others in the group as their minds were connected similarly as two computers sharing the same hard-drive, but twice as powerful.

**Norm of escalating reciprocity:** the dynamic that pushes members to both match and exceed each other’s work, ultimately increasing the quality of the work done by the group as a whole, and by each member singularly.

**Magnet place:** a place where people value the expertise and practice the skills the prospective members hope to acquire. As a concept this is more descriptive than analytical, and difficult to coherently fold into the theory of collaborative circles. Throughout the work, for example, Farrell broadly refers to various resources without specifying how they can be analytically differentiated. Moreover, for Farrell, the
“magnet place” does not evolve with the group and thus plays only a limited role in the progression of stages.

**Resource mobilization theory (RMT):** RMT is a structural perspective of social movements that takes grievances as given and thus seeks to explain the emergence, persistence, and decline of social movements by examining how social actors create or gain access to key resources to pursue a common agenda. A recent formulation of this approach includes five general types of resources: human, material, moral, social-organizational, and cultural (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

**Human resources:** include labor, experience, skills and expertise; they are highly dependent on different activists (and therefore not transferable) and depending on the kind of movement and stage of development, some activists are more valuable than others.

**Material resources:** refer to money, equipment, supplies, and other tangible artifacts. Money is a key resource that can be converted into more or less any other type of resource, with the partial exception of moral resources—partial in the sense that in order to be most effective, moral resources should appear spontaneous and not bought (Lin 2001).

**Moral resources:** include solidarity support, sympathetic support, and celebrity (Cress and Snow 1996; Lahausen 1996; Meyer and Gamson 1995; Snow 1979).

**Locational resources:** enabling resources that are available passively to all actors in a
particular location. They refer to properties inherent to the location which can be enjoyed as a resource for virtually any group in the area without having to be actively mobilized. Typically, locational resources include such things as climate, local economy, demography, and cultural history of the place. The presence of locational resources can positively augment the accessibility or usefulness of other species of resources.

III. How this Study was Conducted: Data and Methods

The majority of the data was gathered in Greenville, North Carolina between September 2004 and July 2007 through participant observation and twenty-six semi-structured interviews with BMX riders living in or visiting town during that period.

The sample comprised nearly the totality of Greenville pros, plus a number of visiting riders and other members of the community. Interviewees were selected by theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), meaning that interviewees were included to cover each category in the typology of actors that I developed over the course of my fieldwork, and with the help of two key informants (Whyte 1943).

Subjects viewed me as a “buddy researcher” (Snow, Benford, and Anderson 1986) which is a type of “researcher-participant” (Gans 1982) particularly helpful in generating trust (Whyte 1943), and entailing a complementary combination of the responsibilities of researcher and friend. Acceptance and trust from the BMX community enabled me to effectively employ a variety of techniques to gather information in the field and in interviews.
IV. References


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. 1996. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge University Press.


1) **Self-understanding of creativity and productivity:**

   a) Can you recall one of your most original, or pivotal, ideas? If you can, then…

   (i) Jot down on one to four pages as much as you can remember about how you achieved it: circumstances, people you may have had nearby, or been in contact with (specify the contact: via e-mail, talking face to face, via telephone, etc.), activities not pertaining the idea in which you may have been involved with at the time (for example: swimming, walking, writing, or talking), etc.

   (ii) Next, present to the class the process it took you to attain the idea—and potentially to refine it, and implement it.

   (iii) Conclude with a brief summary on how you think you work best, and compare it to others in the class. The idea is to use this chance to become more aware on how we work best, and also learn from others the techniques they prefer.

2) **Alternative theories and concepts related to “creativity”:**

   i) Search academic literature in different fields looking for concepts and theories dealing with “creativity” (for example: in management, business, psychological social psychology, sociological social psychology, sport sociology, general sociology, etc.).

   ii) How do their explanations of creativity differ from collaborative circles theory, and its refinement presented in this study?

   iii) Are they complimentary, or are they antithetical? And how might they be used to refine one another?

3) **Processes of legitimation:** Find and list other activities that were *once* considered counter-cultural, were largely stigmatized, and have now been largely accepted.

   i) Can you trace how this change of perception took place?

   ii) Can you identify the factors, incidents as well as the actors who drove these changes?

   iii) Who opposed those changes? How and why?

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1 I thank Bob Edwards and John N. Parker for good suggestions.
iv) If you were to select a few indicators that could measure this change in perception, which ones would they be?

v) How would you go about conducting such a study? Which kinds of methods would you use and to what benefit?

vi) How would you formulate a research question based on your reflections? Limit yourself to a maximum of three short sentences.

4) **Empirical exercise as next step**: Can you locate and get access to a pioneer in one of the activities you have identified? If this is the case…

   i) Can you prepare a set of a maximum ten questions based on question #1?

   ii) If the answer is yes, then interview this person, and write down the highlights of the interview.

5) **Comparing evidence from different cases in class**: Assuming different students (or groups of students) have gathered material on different pioneers in different activities…

   i) How do different cases compare? What are the similarities and what are the differences?

   ii) Each student (or group) chooses how to present his/her findings. Next, use a class discussion trying to identify commonalities and differences among them.

6) **Imagining you are a peer reviewer for the Social Psychology Quarterly evaluating Corte’ study (2013)**:

   i) Which are its major strengths?

   ii) Which are its deficits?

   iii) How could the study have been done better?

   iv) If you were to continue it, how would you go about it and to what end?

   v) Can you identity a different sociology journal where Corte’s piece would have also fit as it is?

7) **Theory-building**:

   i) What’s the purpose of “theory-building” and what does it mean? (Hint: jot down your own ideas, as well search literature on the topic).
ii) In the original article, Corte refers to Snow, Morrill, and Anderson (2003) to talk about applying a “theoretical extension” as way to do “theory-building.”

iii) What is a “theoretical extension”? 

iv) Which are other ways in which this endeavor is pursued?

v) **For graduate students**: Can you identify academic papers exemplary of these alternative ways of doing theory-building?

   (i) Assuming you have identified one representative for each type, succinctly summarize, and then present to the class the argument of each of these papers.

   Note that it is entirely up to you how to present your findings.

8) **Empirical examples relating to collaborative circles theory (CCT):**

   i) Can you identify one collaborative circle?

   If you can, then:

   1. List it, describe it, and explain why it can fit under the definition.

   2. Next, try applying selected aspects of CCT to it by finding material from secondary sources.

   3. Write a one to three pages reflection paper pointing out how your findings match, and/or differ, from CCT as presented in Corte’s (2013).