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## Creative Careers and Self-actualization

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Creative Careers and Self-Actualization

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## **Introduction**

Research about people who work in creative careers and their ratings of self-actualization is somewhat limited. How should creativity be defined? Are creative individuals more likely to score high on scales of self-actualization or life satisfaction? What motivates these individuals? Creativity, self-actualization, and job motivation have each been researched separately within the field of psychology. However, there has been little research on the associations between these different concepts. In order to better understand these factors, the existing research regarding creativity, self-actualization, and career motivations is reviewed.

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced a theory describing human motivation in terms of satisfying categories of higher and lower needs. Since then, his theory of a “Hierarchy of Needs” has gained great popularity. According to Maslow, humankind’s most primal and basic needs reside at the bottom of the pyramid: Food, water, sleep, breathing, homeostasis, bodily functions, and sexual needs. Above these are needs for safety, love, and esteem correspondingly. At the tip of the pyramid is the need that Maslow believes many people will never achieve: self-actualization. In his own words, self-actualization refers to “experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption” (Maslow, 1943).

According to career counselor Samuel Sackett (1998), many people fail to achieve self-actualization because they lack trust in themselves, their environment, and in others, which prevents them from freely experiencing life. However, he believes that self-actualization is possible despite the difficult process.

Sackett also discusses the eight ways of knowing that self-actualization has been achieved. The first way of knowing is the ability to be fully absorbed and concentrated in one's labor. The second way of knowing assesses fear versus growth, which states that choosing options that allow for growth within a person's career will lead them on the path towards self-actualization. Selflessness is the third way of knowing that one is self-actualized, meaning that the individual must shut out the external world and become in touch with true feelings. Fourth, a self-actualized individual must be honest in his or her actions. Fifth, according to Sackett, is dissatisfaction with compensation. Sixth is the ability to trust your own decisions and not be influenced by others. The recognition of peak experiences, or experiences that seem to be of increased significance, is the seventh way of knowing that one is self-actualized. Openness to experience is the eighth and final way of knowing. Without being open to new experiences, the individual is not encouraged to grow (Sackett, 1998).

#### *Past Self-Actualization and Life Satisfaction Research*

Vitterso (2004) reported a study to examine the structure of subjective life quality in addition to addressing the difference between subjective well-being and self-actualization. Two hundred and sixty-four Norwegian students participated in the study. These subjects were asked to complete a five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale developed by Diener and colleagues (1985). In addition, personality traits were assessed using the Norwegian Big Five Inventory. Self-actualization was measured through openness to experience. All data was collected through the use of questionnaires. There was not a significant correlation found between subjective

well-being and openness to experience, which in this study can be considered synonymous to self-actualization. Subjective well-being was found to be associated with a general feeling of contentedness.

### *Past Creativity Research*

An article written by Amabile and Pillemer (2012) provides a highly useful overview of the most relevant and current creativity literature. This article discusses creativity as not only a personality trait, but also as a cognitive and social process. The authors suggest that creativity is a skill that can be learned. Also discussed is the notion of conformity as an opponent to creativity. This was described in an example using the confines of certain social norms, such as appropriate dress, as one illustration of conformity as a hindrance to creative expression (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

When first studied, creativity was measured through the use of writing or drawing tasks that were difficult to interpret. As a concept that in itself is difficult to define, creativity was likely to be biased in accordance to the feelings of the person who was judging it. In order to make a clearer assessment of what constitutes creativity, the authors developed a tool known as the Consensual Assessment Technique, or CAT. This tool has been useful in improving inter-rater reliability (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

Amabile and Pillemer (2012) also provided useful information on possible motivations for creativity. For example, a poet claimed that monetary or social pressure to perform actually hindered the creative quality of her work. The paper then spoke of the literature in support of creativity and its strong connection with

intrinsic motivation. Interestingly enough, a study found that offering participants an external reward for creative outputs actually lowered both productivity and self-ratings of enjoyment. This paralleled similar findings on children's intrinsic motivation when offered an extrinsic reward. In lieu of this, Amabile eventually developed something called the Intrinsic Motivation Hypothesis of Creativity, later renamed the Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity due to increased support within the research. This principle states that intrinsic motivations tend to encourage creative behavior while external motivations are more likely to actually deter it (Amabile & Pillmer, 2012).

Expected evaluations were also found to lower creativity in several studies on both children and adults. Social and environmental factors play a part as well, and individuals with creative co-workers were more likely to be creative themselves. A study supporting this concept involved a group project in the workforce. The groups were composed of people who had never previously met before and were required to work together on projects for the span of several months. Interestingly, the first few minutes of the group's interaction were the most critical in terms of predicting creativity. It was found that when interpersonal congruence, or the sharing of their personal views, occurred in an initial meeting, the team was more likely to yield creative results. Another study in China found that harmonious passion was more important than indications of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in creativity expectations. In one study reviewed by these authors, individuals were urged to think and answer questions creatively. Doing so actually caused participants to be more likely to give dishonest feedback than those

who were not urged to answer creatively. In addition, positive affect has been found to improve divergent thinking in creative tasks (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

Blanche (2007) completed a study discussing creativity in terms of profession. She first acknowledged a link between creativity and play, which seem to share similar elements. Because of this, she considered them to be related concepts and judged creativity as being related to adult play. The study analyzed creativity through the reports of twelve males and ten females for a total of 22 individuals ranging in age from 25 to 55. The method used was a naturalistic study, which centered specifically on adult play, viewed by the researchers as a form of creativity. Interviews, surveys, and direct observation were all taken into account (Blanche, 2007).

Blanche (2007) described creativity as process oriented and intrinsically motivated behavior. This was examined through the use of interviews to assess an individual's feelings about creativity and related activities. The researcher found that participants felt that they were able to be creative throughout their everyday life in more mundane ways than expected. For example, one woman felt she was creative in the way she dressed or cooked. She also found that individuals who were process oriented more than outcome oriented were more likely to be creative because they were more focused on the act of creating than the actual output of the work. These individuals were also more flexible in the way in which they completed tasks and more interested in self-expression (Blanche, 2007).

*Research About Creative Careers*

A survey known as the DOES, or the Daily Occupational Experience Survey, was used to analyze creativity in different professions. In addition to a more qualitative analysis of 22 individuals, Blanche (2007) discussed 477 primary occupations and 237 secondary occupations. Of these professions, 34% of primary occupations were described as creative in comparison with 49% of secondary occupations. This information would suggest that individuals are more likely to be creative in a secondary career than they would in their primary profession (Blanche, 2007).

One study by Gluck, Roland, and Floortje (2002) examined whether artists differ in their conceptions of creativity depending on whether or not they experienced freedom in their work. This difference would be relevant between a painter and an architect for example, because the painter paints what he wishes whereas an architect is likely to be bound by the guidelines or wishes of another. The study maintains that creativity is possible in the face of situations with as well as without firm constraints. However several differences were apparent. Constrained artists valued the ability to function efficiently more than “free” artists and placed less value on originality (Gluck, Roland, & Floortje, 2002).

Elchardus and Smit (2008) discussed flexibility and ambition within one’s career as a reflection of the desire to achieve self-realization. The article discusses the way that work motivations have shifted over the past generation. Individuals are more concerned with their self-realization, and responsibilities such as family and work that were once the main focus and have now become a byproduct of this desire to achieve self-realization. Workers also look for more flexibility within their



careers, and this may cause a change in the somewhat more rigid career schema that many people have held in the past. Participants of the Elchardus and Smit study were 4,666 Belgian citizens between the ages of 19 and 36 years old. Participants were asked to complete written questionnaires in order to assess factors of job motivation and flexibility (Elchardus & Smit, 2008).

Results were sorted into four separate groups in terms of career model. 38% of participants sought a stable, upwardly mobile career meaning they wanted to work full time and be promoted within the same sector of their career. They also expected that they would be earning a greater salary in the future. The second group consisting of 28% of participants held ambitious and flexible career models. These individuals had positive attitudes towards flexibility and most expected a promotion by changing their field of occupation. The individuals in the third group consisted of 21% percent of subjects favored a flat, rigid career path. A low level of ambition and significant rejections of flexibility characterized this career model. The final, and smallest group with only about thirteen percent of participants described the desire for a transient and flexible career. This was characterized by fears of unemployment in addition to decreased ambition. The need to support a family was found to be a motivating factor for individuals in or desiring more traditional and rigid careers (Elchardus & Smit, 2008).

#### *Research About Cultural Differences in Creativity*

Zhou and Su (2010) discuss differences in creativity that may exist between cultures. It has been found in previous research that ratings of creativity differ greatly between the Eastern and Western hemispheres, especially between Asian

cultures and America. One study examining creativity between Americans and Chinese citizens found that Americans consistently rated more highly on measures of fluency, flexibility, and originality than Chinese individuals.

Similarly, another study using tests known as the TTCT, or Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, found that American college students performed more creatively than Japanese students. Divergent thinking was also mentioned, and found that American graduate students scored higher on measures of divergent thinking than Chinese graduate students. In addition, American students scored higher on uniqueness ratings than those students from Malay (Zhou & Su, 2010).

These findings show that for whatever reason, differences in the expression of creativity exist between members of different cultures. This is not to say that one population is necessarily lacking creativity, but that it is not expressed in the same way and there are many possible reasons as to why this may be so (Zhou & Su, 2010).

Shalley, Gilson, and Blum (2000) discussed the concept of job creativity requirement. The authors predicted that job creativity requirement would be positively correlated with the complexity, autonomy, and demand for that particular job. They also hypothesized that individuals would have less of a desire to leave their current position if they were in an environment that was conducive to job creativity requirement. Research was conducted as a part of a larger telephone study in which interviews were given over the phone to address information about jobs, work environments, career satisfaction, and loyalty to stay in one's current job. All interviews conducted involved individuals from the United States who were

called at random. A self-reported measure of creativity requirement was used in which participants stated to the extent that they agreed with statements such as “my job requires me to be creative”, on a four-item scale. An objective measure, known as the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, was also used (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000).

Results supported the hypotheses, indicating that careers with high creativity requirements were associated with the completion of complex tasks, autonomy, and demanding but flexible work. In addition, individuals were more satisfied and less likely to want to leave their profession if their work environment was complementary to the creative requirements of their career (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000).

Kim, Hon, and Lee (2010) also discuss creativity within the workplace. Recognizing the value of such a trait within a career, the authors designed a study to determine other factors that were related to creativity within this context. The study took place in South Korea. 107 employee-supervisor pairs took part in the study, which consisted of the completion of a questionnaire (Kim, Hon, & Lee, 2010).

Four main factors were examined in this study. First, the disposition of an individual to take an active stance towards innovating change, referred to as proactive personality, was measured using a ten-item scale. People with proactive personalities were considered leaders in the sense that they take actions to influence their environment and make a difference. The second factor was job creativity requirement. As in previously mentioned research, job creativity requirements can be described as aspects of an individual’s careers that call for

autonomy, the completion of complex tasks, and creativity. This was measured using a four-item scale designed by Gilson and Shalley. Supervisor support for creativity was also measured in terms of an additional four-item scale. Finally, employee creativity was measured using a thirteen-item scale (Kim, Hon, & Lee, 2010).

The results of the study showed that proactive personalities were highly correlated with employee creativity. In addition, high job creativity requirement and supervisor support also positively influenced creativity (Kim, Hon, & Lee, 2010). This information suggests that many outside factors influence employee creativity. This is also consistent with Amabile and Pillemer's notion that creativity is not necessarily an inherent trait so much as a learned skill.

#### *Purpose for Current Study*

Creativity has been valued throughout cultures around the world through writing, music, art, and many other outlets of expression. As the literature suggests, creativity is strongly linked to intrinsic motivation and can also be subjective in nature. However, what effect does creativity have on our outlook on everyday life? Most people spend the majority of their waking lives working, so does having a creative career impact other factors of our emotional well-being and personal growth? What differences exist between individuals who spend their time working creatively and those who do not? Does creative expression within a profession facilitate an individual's quest towards self-actualization? Could freedom for creativity within a career allow people to experience overall greater satisfaction in their everyday lives compared to someone who is not using this type of expression?

Are these individuals motivated by different drivers than the rest of the population?

There were three main hypotheses in this study. The first hypothesis was that individuals in highly creative careers would be more likely to score highly on scales of self-actualization than those less creative careers. The second hypothesis was that these same individuals would also score more highly on scales of satisfaction with life than other groups of less creative careers. The third hypothesis was that individuals in highly creative careers would be more likely to be motivated by intrinsic motivations such as benefitting the greater good and personal satisfaction.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was completed in Amsterdam, Holland to address the above questions. The participants of the study were 34 employed individuals living and working in the Netherlands. Participants ranged in age from around 20 to 70 years old. 15 subjects were women and 19 were men. Individuals ranged from middle to upper class in socioeconomic standings. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling and were given surveys with three sections.

The first section consisted of five questions from the Satisfaction with Life Scale by Emmons et al. The second part of the survey consisted of the eighteen most effective questions from the Sumerlin and Bundrick Brief Index of Self-Actualization. These questions were statements that allowed the individual to assess a number value to a given statement based on how true they thought it was. The final section was a series of open-ended and yes or no questions pertaining to an individual's career. Some questions included: Could you describe a typical day in your career?

What brought you to the field that you are in today? When you are working, do you feel that you are completely absorbed and fully concentrated on your work? A video camera was also used to videotape five participants who were willing to have their open-ended section of the questionnaire recorded for the purpose of making a short documentary film.

Individuals were divided into groups based on the researcher's rating of creativity of profession. Highly creative careers included people who literally are creators - those who are actively innovating and creating new things, such as those who start their own business from scratch, artists, or designers of any sort. The neutral group included individuals with somewhat less freedom or ability to create without being completely void, for example a teacher who is free in some sense to teach a class any way they desire, but is still bound by the subject material and the rules of the institution. The least creative group consisted of individuals with little to no ability to create within their career, which would include someone like a secretary or security officer who has little to no say in what they do on a day-to-day basis or how they do it.

After signing the consent form, recruited individuals were given the choice of how they wanted to complete the study. Most individuals chose to take the written survey and fill out the open-ended questions in writing. However, some agreed to being verbally questioned while video recorded. A 40 minute documentary was created by editing the footage from interviews with five creative professionals (an opera singer, etc.) talking about their creative experiences within their work. In addition, survey data from 26 persons were analyzed. Questions from the

Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Brief Index of Self-Actualization were assessed numerically. Open-ended questions from the last part of the questionnaire were analyzed for content to assess factors such as freedom within profession, satisfaction, and motivation. Not all questions were scored quantitatively in terms of yes or no. The rest of the questions were used to assess qualitative aspects of one's career. Upon completion of research, individuals were sent debriefings via email. Participants in the documentary interviews will each be sent a copy of the video.

The results of the pilot study showed no noticeable difference in self-actualization across career groups. Gender, freedom within profession, intrinsic motivation, satisfaction with compensation, and number of years worked in a profession also yielded no significant results. Number of years worked in a profession was not found to predict life satisfaction. These non-significant results could be caused by several factors including the small sample size or a non-representative sample. The researcher also might not have had accurate insight into how creative their careers truly were and may have misjudged creativity ratings. However, there was one significant finding in the pilot study. Individuals who worked in especially creative careers were found to be more likely to be intrinsically motivated than those who worked in neutral or less creative careers. This correlation was demonstrated using the Chi-Square test shown below.

**creativity012 \* Intrinsic01 Crosstabulation**

Count

		Intrinsic01		Total
		.00	1.00	
creativity012	.00	3	4	7
	1.00	8	2	10
	2.00	10	0	10
Total		21	6	27

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	7.824 <sup>a</sup>	2	.020	.014		
Likelihood Ratio	9.035	2	.011	.014		
Fisher's Exact Test	7.052			.014		
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.280 <sup>b</sup>	1	.007	.007	.007	.006
N of Valid Cases	27					

a. 3 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.56.

b. The standardized statistic is -2.698.

From the pilot study it was determined that participants' own ratings of career creativity may be better assessments in addressing the research questions. In addition, the information gained from this study was more qualitative in nature and provided less statistical evidence on the topics of self-actualization, satisfaction with life, and specific motivations for these individuals.

**Current Study**

There were a total of 337 participants in the current study. Participants were all over the age of 18 and represented a wide variety of careers. Most participants were from the United States and India, though there were several from other various countries who were not taken into account because of their small demographic. Participants completed a survey online using Amazon Mechanical



Turk. Amazon Mechanical Turk is an internet extension of Amazon.com that allows individuals from anywhere in the world with internet access to complete surveys in exchange for monetary reimbursement. Burmester, Kwong, and Gosling (2011) found that Amazon Mechanical Turk was more likely to yield a demographically diverse sample of participants than those recruited through the means of paper and pencil and that the results are at least as reliable as those retained manually. Participants in the current study were reimbursed twenty cents for their completion of the survey, which took roughly five minutes or less to fill out.

After logging onto Amazon Mechanical Turk, participants chose to complete this survey from a database of other similar surveys. They completed an online consent form and then were asked to list their profession. Participants were also asked to determine how creative their career was based on a brief description provided. In addition, the researcher rated level of career creativity for comparison. Participants were given a brief description of what they might consider a career that fell into one of the three categories of highly creative, neither creative nor uncreative, or not at all creative. After rating themselves, participants completed three measures to assess motivation, self-actualization, and satisfaction with life.

Self-actualization was measured using a scale known as the Brief Index of Self-Actualization by Sumerlin and Bundrick. 18 statements from this scale were used, but of these 18 only five of these were taken into account. These five items specifically addressed core self-actualization which was the focus of this study. An example of a statement from this scale was "I think that what I am doing now will

benefit mankind.” Participants rated their agreement with these statements on a scale of 1-6.

Satisfaction with life was also assessed using a Satisfaction with Life scale by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin. An example of a statement from this scale is “In most ways, my life is close to ideal.” These statements are also rated on a scale of 1-6. Differences in motivation were also measured using a question to address specific motivations. This question asked “What are you most motivated by?” There were four options for answering this question: the greater good, personal satisfaction, really need the money, or recognition from others. This question was designed to highlight any intrinsic or extrinsic motivations for working. The researcher believed that the greater good and personal satisfaction would be indicative of intrinsic motivations while really needing money or recognition from others would be more extrinsic.

## **Results**

109 participants of this study were from the United States, 196 were from India, and 25 were from various other countries. The last group was not taken into account for analyses due to its small demographic. Out of a total of 340 participants, 126 were female and 214 were male. The average age of participants was 29.9 years old but ranged between the ages of 18 and 68. Individuals listed a wide range of careers. Some examples of those listed are chef, bartender, sales manager,

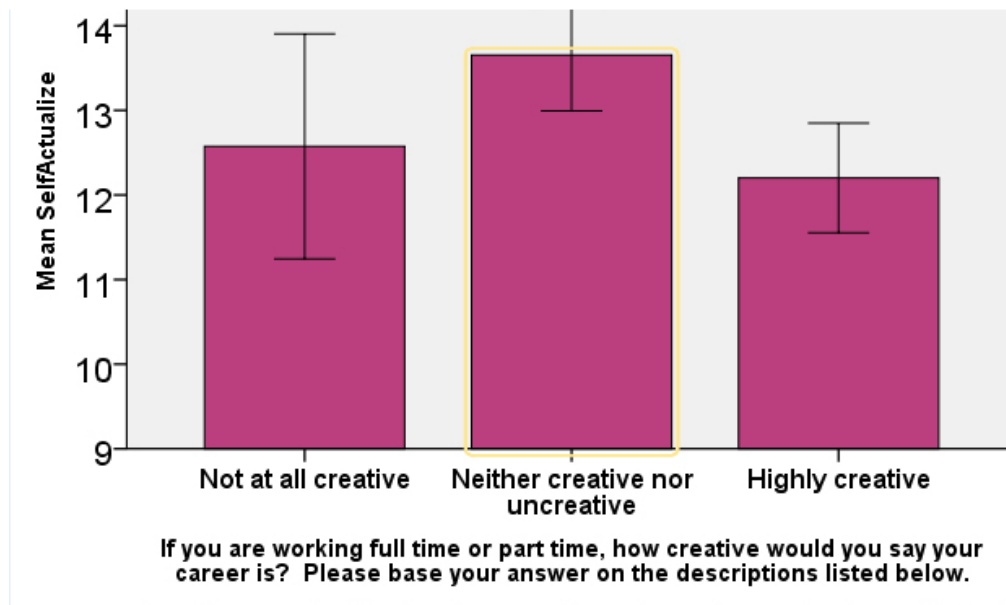
embryologist, software developer, X-ray technician, accountant, and freelance writer.

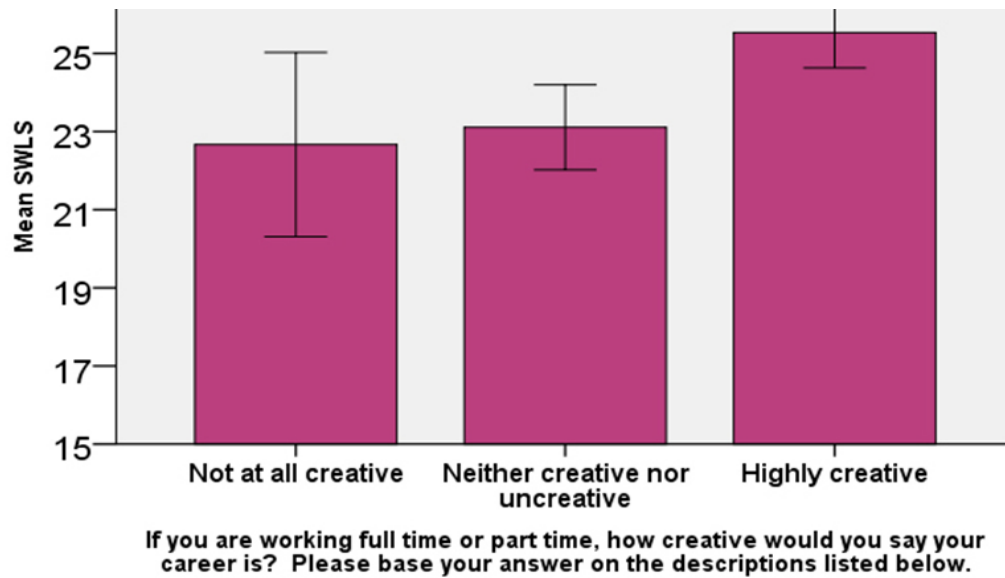
When participants rated the creativity of their career, 12.8% thought that they were in a profession that was not at all creative. 39.74 % of these individuals believed that their careers were neither creative nor uncreative, and 48.18% individuals found their careers to be highly creative. However, when the researcher rated these careers, the numbers were somewhat different. Researcher rated career creativity found 34.3% of careers to be not at all creative, 46.35% to be neither creative nor uncreative, and 19.35% of careers to be highly creative. Percent agreement between these two groups was only 32%, and only participants' self-ratings proved to be statistically significant.

Though the survey contained 18 statements from the Brief Index of Self-Actualization, only the five statements relating specifically to core self-actualization were taken into account. Reliability for the self-actualization scale was fairly high with a Cronbach's alpha of .78. Reliability for the life satisfaction scale was also high and had a Cronbach's alpha .89.

Scores on self-actualization, satisfaction with life, and specific were all analyzed using one-way ANOVAs. Satisfaction with life was found to be significantly highest for individuals in highly creative careers:  $f(2,305)=6.911, p=.001$ . Self-actualization scores were also found to be significantly different across career groups, with the middle group of individuals who felt that their careers were neither creative nor uncreative scoring highest:  $F(2, 287)=3.531, p=.001$ .

Each of the specific motivations were also found to be significant. Tukey HSD tests confirmed that individuals in highly creative careers were more likely to be motivated by personal satisfaction:  $F(2, 252)=6.407, p=.002$ , the greater good:  $F(2, 250)=8.765, p<.001$ , and recognition:  $F(2, 250)=7.470, p=.001$ . Based on the Tukey HSD test, the not at all creative career group scored significantly higher on the motivation of really needing the money than the other two groups. Individuals who thought that their careers were uncreative were more likely to really need the money to get by:  $F(2, 250)=3.519, p=.031$ . The Tukey HSD test also found significantly higher results for the highly creative career group for wanting to be wealthy:  $F(2, 252)=6.552, p=.002$ . Differences between India and the United States were also assessed using an independent samples t-test. The only significant difference found was for satisfaction with life in that people from India tended to score more highly on this measure:  $F(302, 190)=6.856, p<.001$ . Results for satisfaction with life and self-actualization are indicated in the following graphs:





## Discussion

The results for self-actualization were not as the hypothesis predicted. Instead of the most creative career group ranking highest, the middle group of individuals who were neither creative nor uncreative actually scored the highest on self-actualization. This may have occurred for several reasons. One main reason for this result may be that the Brief Index of Self-actualization Scale may not be as effective at addressing the elements of self-actualization in the ways that Maslow had described. Future research addressing self-actualization might use a different scale to measure this. In addition, the sampling may not have been representative of the career groups of interest.

However, the other two hypotheses were supported. Satisfaction with life scores were as predicted, and the highly creative career group did in fact score highest on this measure. This scale has been well tested, and so can be more

confidently relied upon. These findings suggest that the freedom for creative expression within the workplace may actually increase life satisfaction.

For specific motivations, individuals in highly creative careers were more likely to be motivated by factors such as the greater good, personal satisfaction, the desire to be wealthy, and recognition from others. The last two of these motivations are more surprising because they seem more extrinsic. Individuals who were in less creative careers were more likely to be motivated by needing money.

This information about differences in motivation may be useful for both employers and individuals in the workforce. It appears that career creativity is linked to satisfaction with life, and so individuals may want to choose a position where they feel they are able to be creative in their own way. In addition, employers who are looking for creative workers may try to provide incentives other than money to encourage individuals to work creatively. For example, a worker may perform more creatively if they are told that they will be able to gain public recognition than if they are offered an increase in pay.

The number of individuals who rated themselves in highly creative careers may be indicative of a personal bias to think that your own career is more creative than another, or may also suggest that these individuals simply had better subjective knowledge of how creative their careers really were. Perhaps a third party rater is not as likely to understand the complexities of a career and recognize the freedom for creativity within a profession. In addition, the research suggests that there may be cultural differences that exist for satisfaction with life in other parts of the world.

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