

Hockey sticks and trolls: How we experience our culture is how we view creativity

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Preamble

The study of creativity is vast, with a long history and regular questioning of its intent, purpose and consequences. In writing this paper I recognize this history and will attempt to work my way through one component of a large domain to which I have so far made relatively minor contributions. In presenting this paper I hope to push us to examine our own understanding of what it is to be creative in our own situation, but also within the context of our daily lives inside communities. I recognize that to do this I need to situate my understanding of creativity as an educator, a parent, and a researcher. Creativity for me goes beyond art music and dance (the common repositories of where we are permitted to be creative) and leads us through our daily lives. It is inextricably woven within problem-solving, critical thinking, the ways we learn through experience and make connections between ideas. Though a precise definition is challenging to settle upon, I make the assumption that creativity is a demonstrable personal trait or quality that is expressed through various talents, media, and forms. When the product of that trait is visible, it is judged to be novel and useful, and it improves upon or demonstrates a re-thinking of previous iterations. A creative output should be surprising, interesting for its own sake, have perceived value and unique elements.

Introduction

Creativity in adults is sometimes rewarded and sometimes punished, depending on the context. To call someone creative is to be complimentary, or can be used as a polite substitute synonym for commonly devalued traits such as weird, strange, disruptive, or non-academic. The way we use the term creativity forms how we think about it, and in turn represents how it becomes recognized in our society. So to enter into this discussion it is important to recognize how we personally use and react to the term creative. When we think about and discuss creativity it is critical to situate ourselves in the domain. Do we like or react against the term creative? Do we prefer terms such as innovation or imagination, or would we rather fix the unit of analysis at related sub-terms such as critical thinking, problem-solving and divergent thinking (etc.)? These sub-domains of the umbrella term of creativity allow us to position

our own thoughts within a framework of acceptance which provide us with structure through the definitional arguments. To lead the point then, this paper is about two things- personal definitions of creativity and group definitions that can allow for cross-cultural relativity.

Personal definitions are shaped by experience and knowledge. Creativity as a definitional term and fluid trait is of particular relevance to myself as a parent, as it seems the lives of many parents such as myself are now filled with advice columns and books along the lines of: '10 ways to encourage your children to think creatively' or 'how parents nurture the creative spirit' while simultaneously being prompted to watch Ken Robinson's TED-talk asking us to examine whether our schools are killing creativity. What I mean to emphasize is that there is no shortage of talk about creativity in the public sphere, and this influences how we consume the idea of creativity and affects how we are able to theorize about it. The common market persists in telling us that it is important, that children should be creative, that this is how we will save the world economy and the environment, and raise happy, healthy children. A fix-all if there ever was one. As an educational researcher it also acts as a driver for me to explore where it comes from, how it develops, and how social conditions influence the structure and development of this trait expression. Pop-culture relevance indicates that the term creativity itself can be formed in uniquely personal ways in terms of definitions as well as the construct of the domain.

Upon reflection, to debate the true nature of creativity is to attempt to understand what makes us uniquely human. As we understand this tendency we must ask ourselves what our purposes are in creation, whether the creative act is equivalent or comparable to the creative product, and to what extent do intention, behaviour, imagination, and culture play a role in the formation and development of human tendencies? Deferring to the questions that Marte poses in her paper around the word *practice*, the concept of creativity is also personal, is subjective, and is conditioned by our participation and education within and outside of many domains. The similarities do not end there, and there are some interesting ties between what we see as creativity, and what happens when we engage in embodied making. When we take on this topic we must recognize that the answers are not straightforward, but always subjective and personal, while relying on the thoughts and ideas of those that have also explored the same questions.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of creativity as well as the intersubjectivities of what makes creativity a force. Certainly there is also “a need to develop an understanding of how social environments can promote or inhibit creativity, and of course, how our definition of creativity determines our selection of exemplars” (Montouri & Purser, 1999, p.5). The aim is to eventually develop a culturally-responsive framework for analyzing qualitative data collected from a large cross-cultural study. Within this study we aim to explore the subjectivities at play in analyzing what it means to be creative, and how that concept can be demonstrated and evaluated. In order to better understand the nature of the concept we must situate creativity within its historical context and space.

Literature and Background

It can be argued that creativity is produced and recognized through its value in a culture and the connections made between the maker and others. “Creativity is relational in nature and born of intersubjectivity” (Glăveneau, 2010, p. 152). Creativity, as recognized by a culture and by individuals is influenced by the values the culture holds, as well as the prior knowledge and understanding of the creator and observer. When creativity is examined from an intersubjective and culturally-impregnated point of view, it becomes clear that creativity is possible within every person and allows for interpretations of what is creative, novel, or serves a purpose (Rudowicz, 2003). Creativity then, becomes both relational as well as responsive to environmental press and cultural needs. The press of the social situation influences the development of individuals, and the situation provides the impetus and support for the creative product, idea, or concept to be born. We have ample evidence of creative epochs that have been recognized throughout history. Others have written extensively about social conditions that allow creativity to flourish. Montouri and Purser (1999) discuss the creativity of the London music scene in the 1970s and 1980s driven by a series of connected economic and social events. The Renaissance in Florence, Vienna at the turn of the century, and ancient Egypt are all common examples of epochs of creativity where new ideas flourished and social conditions led to the support of innovation and developments in science, technology and the arts (Natarjan, 2013). With relatively new global connectedness we now are able to have a better understanding of localized communities of creativity, rather than epochs, and as researchers we can see in real time how cities, communities, schools, and even families can exert positive pressure leading to creativity and work to better

understand the nature of that place. What is it that develops the creative tendency in children and does that quality follow the child to adulthood, does it re-emerge, or re-develop in different forms?

To study creativity in context then, and the ways it is responsive to personal, societal, economic and cultural pressures is to explore it from a systems perspective (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). The systems approach is associated with the social dimensions of creativity while recognizing that the individual is an integral part of a social milieu, both acting upon it, while being acted upon (Runco, 1999). In forming a framework, a systems approach allows for an ecological understanding of the individual within a situation- what acts upon the individual, and what power does the individual have to act upon his environment? A systematic and contextual approach needs to stress the importance of considering relationships between different levels within the system. This starts by defining the system and moves to an understanding of a mutually casual approach that is interactional, situated, and fluid. The mutual casual approach sees creativity as an interactional process occurring in the relationship between system and environment, individual and society, both inside and outside (Montouri & Purser, 1999; Stein, 1963).

A systems approach then guides the analysis of cross-cultural studies of creativity and any in-depth examination of how parents in different cultures, communities, and from different backgrounds view their child's life and creative output. A systems approach as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1999; 2006) proposes that a social psychology of creativity needs to bring together both individuals and the societal structures that they are bounded by. The connection here between creative production and thought is between a person, the field, and a domain. So we need to recognize that there is interconnectedness in systems, and that a person is influenced by their environment, by their space, and by their upbringing. A systems approach relies on the understanding that an individual is not just defined by his or her product, a creative person (everybody) works within a system that promotes or denies potential opportunities. Within the context of this work our framework needs to be represented on these different levels, and examine not only the creative product or trait, but the system that allowed the product or trait to emerge and be recognized. A systems approach provides the opportunity to contextualise creative acts, as well as gives the reader the opportunity to understand how creativity takes place (trait or product) in all of its complexity. Secondly, we are able to view creativity from the standpoint of a witness to creativity. In this context, we are able to situate ourselves as a parent to a child who is being viewed within a domain.

Current Project- Situating Ourselves

The research project undertaken examined the nature of creativity in children in Canada, Norway, and Finland. As part of this study parents of these children were interviewed and asked to discuss their perspectives on creativity in childhood, what (if anything) they did to foster creativity in children, and whether or not they felt that their community, culture, or home environment influenced the development of creativity in their children. As background to this project, we were interested in knowing how creativity forms in children. Stage 1 of this project involved having children in the same three countries complete the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. This static paper and pencil test is designed to measure divergent thinking and in essence how 'differently' a child thinks from his or her peer group. This method was chosen as an entry point to studying creativity as the research team wanted to know more about how creativity is shaped and formed, what we measure when we study creativity, and whether or not tests of creativity are sensitive to cultural differences that emerge in communities and among different nationalities? Findings from this study showed that students in all three countries were indeed different from each other, and exhibited creativity as measured by the TTCT in different ways. Children in Ontario especially seemed to report significantly different scores if they came from urban or rural communities. This unexpected result caused us to question why children in these different environments may be completing the test in different ways- was it possible that their social and home environments were different enough to cause them to complete the exercise differently? Before making assumptions about cultural relativism, a second study was designed to better determine how parents make decisions and understand their child's lives, while fostering specific creative behaviours. Since the parent data was also collected in different sized communities in three different countries, it is important for us to discuss the framework for analysis and better understand the complexities of interpreting cross-cultural research before the data is fully examined.

As we begin to examine the discussions of parents, it is helpful to have a common framework that is open and flexible, but avoids the pitfalls of other research that has interpreted data from cross-cultural studies in distinctly Western ways (Glăveneau, 2010; Rudowicz, 2003). To do this it is proposed that we adopt what Glăveneau refers to as a 'tetradic framework' which might allow for better social and cross-cultural research. This framework situates the actors within their over-arching culture (Canada, Norway, Finland) but recognizes that within each larger culture many sub-cultures and relational behaviours exist. For example, parents in this study live within the larger national culture and

may to a greater or lesser extent identify their beliefs and behaviours as related to their community (urban, small town, rural), their parenting status (biological, adoptive, step), child's school (rural, traditional, non-traditional) and belief in their own efficacy and control as parents.

Framework for Analysis

To recognize this diversity while searching for organization, it is suggested the tetradic framework is suitable (Glăveneau, 2010). Glăveneau suggests that creativity is looked at from four contextual perspectives: Self (creator), others (community), new artifacts (creative product/ process), and existing artifacts (previous knowledge and practices). These four components are not mutually exclusive but reinforce the relational nature of creativity and the implicit and explicit connections between a creative act or behaviour and the culture in which it exists. As the participants in this study are culturally embedded, these general guidelines provide the opportunity to question the cultural expectations of the actor, while also capturing particular types of creative expression and specific behaviours. Similarly, Montouri and Purser (1999) describe the plurality of creative processes as being influenced by our own understanding of creativity as a social phenomenon, as well as the various ways individuals have the potential to be creative, to have their works received, and the direction in which their creative work is going. A contextual and situated view is then most responsive, recognizing cultural preferences while preserving the common thread that will lead to better cross-cultural understandings.

A framework for analysis needs to take into account the systems perspective as well as the tetradic framework. If we assume that creativity emerges through an interaction of a person with a culture (Lubart, 1990) then we need to look at the personal perspective (how does one view him/herself in a culture, as a person), the view of others on that person's creativity, examine the artefacts of the creative process, and artefacts that already exist. In a cross-cultural setting that means taking into account the local context and the relative value of the creative or novel act in situ. To better understand the nature of creativity it is helpful to position oneself as both an insider and outsider- an insider of a culture or sub-culture with particular views toward creativity, while as an outsider of other, less familiar cultures. By accepting outsider status it becomes easier to question what values we hold from within, and what we see without.

A simple example of situational creativity is illustrated by the differences in drawings provided on the TTCT by Canadian and Norwegian children early in the Stage 1 part of the group's work. Though children in both countries scored approximately equally on the TTCT as measured by an independent outside testing centre which was normed based on nationality, the research teams in Canada noticed that the elements of fantasy in the Norwegian drawings were quite different than those that were produced by the Canadian children. Images of trolls figured more prominently, while no Canadian children chose to see figures or expand on drawings to create this imaginary figure. So, anecdotally, we can begin to understand that children in different countries will have different pre-formed expectations and background stories. They will have been exposed to different mythologies, popular culture and expectations. Norwegian children are more likely to encounter references to trolls in their fairy tales while most Canadian children are not. To represent the expectations of those children fairly, we need to pay attention to what experiences they have had and how their parents view their creative lives. It is interesting to postulate how Norwegians might view the unique features present in Canadian children's artwork that may seem commonplace or expected within the national context (an over-abundance of hockey sticks, perhaps?).

The tetradic framework comes into play again when we seek out the layers for analyzing the interviews given by parents of these children. The layers of influence and normal expectations allow us to determine what a parent sees as creative (novel, unique or interesting for them) as well as what they expect for their children. If a parent has a particular view of creativity, that perspective adds to the discourse and expectations for the child. The analysis then needs to be nuanced enough for the reader to view the child from the parent's perspective, and try not to re-form the narrative within the sphere of his or her own life. A parent's perspective on her child's life is not objective, it is subjective and defined within the parent-child relationship, norms of the community, how the parent him or herself was raised, and expectations for child behaviour at home, at school, and in the community. For example, an expectation for a child living in a rural area on a farm is likely different than expectations for a child living in the city. Play, imagination, and free time look different from those perspectives, and rightly so. To compare them against each other is inappropriate, the children live in different environments and have different social expectations. The framework needs to take into account how the child is creative in the child's own world, again referencing the perspective and particular of the parent. As we move through the interviews we need to understand that we are all culturally-embedded with a particular voice of experience. To peel apart the layers of creativity, the following questions must be asked:

1. How does the parent view the individual creativity of the child?
2. What artefacts or forms of creativity does the parent recognize? What has been created and what is important?
3. How does the child participate in the community, in what ways are they socially creative or do they interact with others in novel or interesting ways?
4. Is this child's behaviour unique or routine and expected? Does the child exhibit creativity differently than his or her peers?

To answer these questions within the dynamic model proposed by (Glăveneau, 2010) prepares us to understand the nature of creativity within a social and contextual sphere that is dynamic and reactive. To determine how the broader culture views the individual child's creativity does us few favours because we compare them against a culture we are familiar with, not them. The parent's perspective provides a culturally-embedded but removed voice that can situate creativity within a social framework that is nested within a system. It is our job to interpret that form of creativity and to discuss it in a meaningful way to add to broader understanding.

Conclusion

This paper is meant to invite discussion about the nature of creativity within the systems framework, drawing on the understanding presented within. When we think about the creativity of children we can look from the perspective of the parent, and also closely examine our own expectations and biases. We have all emerged from childhood and are able to view childhood in different ways depending on the experiences we remember and those that changed us. It is easy to compare our lives to those of others, but more difficult to look at another's' life for their own sake, and to examine creativity within a context of reality- that is the community and culture in which the child resides. It is critical to remember that our interpretations are always context-dependent. The purpose of this paper has been to act as a push to go outside our common understanding and it serves to provide us with some ideas on how we can situate ourselves so we remain open to new ideas and realities. This will allow us to better understand the data and lived experiences of the people with whom we interact.

(References forthcoming)