Creativity in and for Society

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this reply to Kaufman's paper "Creativity's Need for Relevance in Research and Real Life" I argue, from a sociocultural and pragmatist standpoint, that creativity matters because it captures the agentic, flexible, open and emergent side of human existence while, at the same time, helping us build, maintain, and transform the societies we live in.

As a pragmatist, I strongly welcome the invitation by Kaufman (2018) in his lead paper to set out a new agenda for creativity research focused on positive outcomes. This agenda should not "romanticize" - i.e., ignore some exploitative, self and other-destructing uses of creativity - but re-focus us on the basic questions of "Why creativity? What does it *do*? Why does it matter?". I will address these important questions from the standpoint of my own sociocultural approach to creativity (Glăveanu, 2014; Glăveanu, Gillespie & Valsiner, 2015). This approach theorizes creativity in distributed and developmental terms, emphasizing its embeddedness within the social and material world (Dewey, 1934; Vygotsky, 1967/2004).

Why Creativity?

In sociocultural psychology, and not only, creativity is related to the history of our species and considered the engine behind the generation and transformation of culture (Festinger, 1983). But there are also more "mundane" reasons for cultivating creativity.

At its core, the creative process is not (only) about formulating ideas that are validated as novel and useful, but about *agency, flexibility, openness, and emergence*. Let's consider each one in turn.

Creative actions carry our agency by shaping the self, others, and the environment (Martin & Gillespie, 2010). While our actions - including creative actions - are always constrained, they are never fully determined. The latter is captured by the notion of creativity, which comes to show that we can act in novel and surprising ways even under highly constraining life situations.

Creativity captures our flexibility towards the world, expressed in the ever-present possibility of changing course and developing new perspectives on any given problem or issue (Glăveanu, 2015a). The fact that we are not trapped within our perceptual here-and-now is both a marker of creativity and its great achievement.

Creativity is grounded in openness. This goes well beyond openness to experience as a personality trait and reflects our basic receptivity towards what comes next and our radical curiosity for understanding and engaging with difference (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2017).

Last but not least, there is emergence. Acts of creativity lead to the generation of something that is, always, more than the sum of the parts or the sum of the influences that led to it. Emergence is a property of open systems, humans included, but what creativity designates is our capacity to both learn from it and guide its unfolding (Sawyer, 1999).

What Does It Do?

There are many things creativity "does" or, rather, helps us do. As a quality of human action, it is part and parcel of all our doings and exchanges (Joas, 1996). There is a particular class of overlooked "doings" I would like to focus on here - they have to do with how creativity helps us *build, maintain, and change society* (see also Glăveanu, 2015b).

We rarely think of creativity in terms of society-building, and yet all human societies find their origin in the creative solutions found by individuals and groups to reduce conflicts and increase cooperation. Living together, particularly in large communities, is not something to be easily explained away by saying that we are "social beings". The latter is certainly the case, but the foundations of human society required the creation of norms and institutions that could accommodate different - sometimes opposite - values and interests. The fact that society is, among others, a creative achievement, can be noticed in all those instances in which its structures break down due to a deficit in novel and useful solutions.

This takes us to the second point: maintaining communal living. Creativity fuels our everyday interactions with other people by endowing us with the flexibility and openness (see above) required to communicate, negotiate, and work together. Its expression is not

reduced to the use of humour or witty interpersonal strategies, but encompasses those hard dialogues we need to have with people whose minds we cannot read and cannot control. The highly polarized societies of today, in the US, Europe and elsewhere, illustrate very well the need for creative engagement with other points of view, one that goes beyond the simple and misleading dichotomy of acceptance/rejection, and towards reimagining society.

The latter is the premise for social change. To start with, maintaining society is always part of its transformation, even if this transformation is gradual and evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Moments of rupture in particular require, more than other times, creativity and imagination. It is all the more surprising, then, to see how the social change and social movements literature barely mention creativity (due, in large part, to the individualistic resonance of this concept). Creative action doesn't only build on social experience, it effectively leads its renewal and transformation. Leaders, visionaries and revolutionaries embody creativity, to different extents and with different consequences, but it is ultimately collectives who change the world through taking risks and making bold, unusual choices.

Why Does It Matter?

This is the preferred question of pragmatists, so I am delighted to see it raised, loudly and clearly, within creativity research. There are two levels to this question that need to be acknowledged: *ontological and epistemological*. The first one orients us towards the phenomenon itself, the second towards our conceptions of it.

Creativity matters, from a sociocultural standpoint, because it is instrumental in adapting us to society while giving us the means to change it. At the end of the day, even the most personal or individual forms of creativity serve a wider, social purpose (though not always a "pro-social" one). To create means to communicate - including with oneself - and, as such, to relate to the world - a world that is, at all times, one of other people as well. Creativity is the primary processes through which we open ourselves to others, to their positions and perspectives, in ways that shape our own position and perspective and ultimately change the social and material field for everyone. Creating, thus, necessarily brings with it a plethora of ethical questions and a shared responsibility for self, for others, and for society (Moran, Cropley & Kaufman, 2014).

At the level of epistemology, the situation is equally complex. Why does the psychology of creativity matter, after all? What does it "do" to how we understand ourselves and the world around us? I won't answer these questions here, but leave them open for readers to reflect on them and reach their own (hopefully creative) conclusions.

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