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Creativity, identity, and representation: Towards a socio-cultural theory of creative identity



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A B S T R A C T

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The present article argues for the need to incorporate a theory of identity in the study of creativity and develops a socio-cultural framework of creative identity drawing inspiration from work on social representations. Creative identities are considered representational projects emerging in the interaction between self (the creator), multiple others (different audiences), and notions of creativity informed by societal discourses. An important temporal dimension is added to this model making the self–other–object triad expand into time and highlighting the changing nature of our representations of creativity and creative people. A basic typology of creative identities is proposed and illustrated with examples ranging from the work of artists and TV show hosts to everyday contexts such as the school and ordinary practices like craft activities. Promoted, denied and problematic identities are defined and contrasted in order to gain a better understanding of how identity – a simultaneously individual and collective project – fosters or, on the contrary, can impede creative work. In the end, a more comprehensive vision of creative identities as social, dynamic, contextual, multiple and mediated is formulated and arguments offered for why this perspective is important for both theory and practice.

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“The psychologists’ problem is that of creative personality” – a key part of Guilford’s APA presidential address to the community of psychologists more than six decades ago (Guilford, 1950, p. 444). Lamenting the scarcity of research in this area, and arguing for the importance of creativity in education and for society at large, Guilford’s call for a more systematic investigation of the phenomenon was not left unheard. Indeed, the decades that followed showed a substantial increase in creativity studies (Runco, 2004) while keeping relatively faithful to this initial formulation of creativity as a system of personality traits and cognitive abilities. In other words, the paradigmatic model for studying creativity has, by and large, revolved around the *creative person* and, ‘within’ the person, a strong emphasis placed on cognition and individual attributes

(Amabile, 1996; Glăveanu, 2010a). On the one hand, this conceptualisation was very fruitful for psychological research, emphasising measurement and facilitating both correlational and experimental studies of creativity (Barron & Harrington, 1981; Finke, Ward, & Smith, 1992). On the other hand, a person-centric formulation disconnects the creator from his/her wider environment. This critique, gaining prominence after the 1980s (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Montuori & Purser, 1995), led to systemic approaches that, without denying the creative person, consider it always in relation to a context (something often acknowledged by research done in applied fields such as education or organisations). For these researchers, reducing creativity to personality is indeed a ‘psychologist’s problem’, one that is still looking for (creative) theoretical and methodological solutions.

This paper aims to advance one possible way of moving past the intrinsic individualism specific for the mainstream psychology of creativity by trying to (re)conceptualise the

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notion of creative identity and exemplify when, how and with what consequences people build identities as ‘creators’. It proposes a conception of identity that draws largely on the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1981, 1984) and articulates a socio-cultural model of creative identities. From this perspective, being a ‘creator’ involves identity work and identity itself is fundamentally a social category. The creative person therefore, far from existing as an isolated unit, is a *social actor* able to co-construct his or her own sense of creative value in communication with others and in relation to societal discourses about what creativity is. In the end, there is creativity in identity construction just as there is identity construction in the most mundane forms of creative expression. Most importantly, identities conducive for creative performance are not just ‘given’ but built over time in interactions that are often marked by struggles and acts of resistance. We will exemplify here some of these processes and suggest a basic typology of creative identities in the second part of the article. It is our hope that such an attempt will stimulate further elaborations and thus begin to expose the big (identity) elephant sitting comfortably in the room of creativity research.

1. Linking creativity and identity: a work in progress

The issue of identity has received until now, with a few exceptions, surprisingly little attention from creativity researchers. This can be due to the fact that identities are less stable than personality traits and, by comparison to cognitive abilities, are considered to be a ‘background’ element in creative production. Current studies in this area fall generally into three main categories. First, there are researches that consider identity in general terms and try to examine the correlation between identity states and creative production with the aim of predicting when people are prone to be more or less creative depending on their identity structure (Barbot, 2008; Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Dollinger, Dollinger, & Centeno, 2005; Šramová & Fichnová, 2008). Other studies consider creative identity specifically and focus on either its antecedents (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-Mcintyre, 2003) or consequences (Hirst, van Dick, & van Knippenberg, 2009; Jaussi, Randel, & Dionne, 2007). Lastly, researchers try also to manipulate social identity experimentally in order to discover causal links between group norms and creativity in particular situations (Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, & Haslam, 2006, 2007). Overall, this type of work into creativity and identity starts from the (often implicit) assumption that creative identity relates to creative performance. But how strong is this link?

In the literature, the relation between creativity beliefs about the self and performance is studied under ‘creative self-efficacy’. This line of research has known a marked expansion in the last decade (see Beghetto, 2006; Jaussi et al., 2007; Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Generally understood as a person’s belief that he or she can be creative in performing a certain work, creative self-efficacy relates to creative identity but should *not* be treated as synonymous. Work by Jaussi et al. (2007) points for instance to the fact that creative personal identity is able to explain variance in

creative performance above and beyond creative self-efficacy. In this type of research, creative personal identity is connected to how much creativity is valued and treated as important by the individual. Although both self-efficacy and identity contribute to a more general creative self factor, the latter underpins the former and may enhance its effects in specific tasks or situations (Karwowski, 2012). On the whole, creative identity is studied as a moderating or mediating variable positioned at the interface between individual or social factors and creative performance (Wand & Zhu, 2011; Wang & Cheng, 2010). A legitimate question that arises is why, unlike self-efficacy, identity has seldom been considered to shape creative behaviour directly.

To answer this question we need to review an older line of research concerning the connection between identity and role performance (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Burke and Reitzes argued there is a strong link between the two only when they share the same frame of reference or the same meanings. This important emphasis on the symbolic ‘content’ of one’s identity comes to the fore in other types of research as well, e.g. studies of stereotype susceptibility. Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) showed in this case that the implicit activation of a social identity has a direct effect on how well a person performs on a task depending on the stereotype associated with that identity (e.g., Asian-American women perform better on a math test when their ethnicity is activated and worse when their gender identity is made salient). What all these studies point to is the fact that, in order to properly unpack the link between identity and behaviour, we need to understand more than how important a certain identity is for the person (here, the identity of being a creative individual). What we need is to study what this identity *means*.

This article proceeds by advancing a perspective that focuses precisely on identity content and brings to the fore its representational nature. Most of the creativity studies mentioned above tend to adopt a quantitative approach and consider (creative) identity as a variable among other variables. They usually conceptualise identity in terms of an individual’s self-assessment (judging one’s own creativity, evaluating group memberships or other personal attributes, etc.) and thus fail to address core questions such as: what is the exact content of this identity? What are the origins of these beliefs about the self? How is the identity of being a creative person formed, experienced and maintained through constant social interaction and what are its consequences for both self and others? The theoretical model proposed next starts from these interrogations in its effort to build a more comprehensive model of the phenomenon.

2. A theoretical model of creative identity

There are many potential sources to draw from in elaborating a socio-cultural account of human identity and applying it to the case of creative identities. Current literature includes such attempts building on either symbolic interactionism (Petkus, 1996), dialogism (de Peuter, 1998), or Vygotskian perspectives (Hagstrom, 2005). The

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