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1 Creativity

A Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

We are all creative, at least potentially. To create means to bring new and useful ideas or things into existence. Being creative is not a luxury but a necessity in today's changing world. Creativity is the key to success in almost all areas of life, personal and professional. Creativity can and should be educated. You can never have enough of it in most civilized societies.

The statements above will probably sound familiar to you. They reflect contemporary views of creativity that are often found within scientific research, societal debates, and policy documents. They all express the generally shared belief (at least in the West) that creativity is universal, important, and that it defines who we are as human beings and as societies. When considering these statements from a historical perspective though, we might be struck to discover that they represent an exception, rather than the norm, both in the past and nowadays. Indeed, it is not only the case that our ancestors lived, prospered, and created, for centuries, without the word "creativity," but also that the phenomena we designate with this term today have often been – and in many ways continue to be – seen as strange, undesirable, and even dangerous.

Creativity: A Historical Perspective

A deeper understanding of **history** reveals the fact that creativity is a modern concept and a modern value (Weiner, 2000; Mason, 2003; Reckwitz, 2017). It both grows out of and reinforces our general belief in the power of individuality and our capacity to create new things and ideas (Negus and Pickering, 2004). But this contemporary interest in and admiration for creativity needs to be understood in its social, scientific, technological, economic, and political context. In other words, it needs to be understood historically. What history teaches us is the fact that, just like our societies are in a constant state of transformation, so too is our conception of creativity and creative people.

Indeed, it is impossible to study the history of creativity outside of the history of civilization and ideas. If creativity is a "child" of the current era, its older incarnations – genius, talent, invention, discovery, or imagination – were also understood differently than today (for a discussion of imagination see Glăveanu, 2017a). These meanings connected to the

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social, political, and economic conditions at the time, which makes writing about history, particularly the history of ideas, a challenging task. Such attempts are always vulnerable to the dangers of presentism (interpreting the past through the lenses of the present). For example, from the standpoint of the present, medieval societies seem excessively traditional, closed, and stable; in other words, they would not be considered nurturing of creativity. Yet many of the cathedrals, icons, and jewels we admire today in cities and museums originated during those times (see Davids and De Munck, 2016). Are these not examples of creativity? They are, of course, but such "creativity" was not labeled or understood in the same manner as today. It was highly unlikely, for instance, for the creators of these historical artifacts to be considered the actual "authors" of their productions.

These inconsistencies make any historical account necessarily selective and incomplete. This chapter will be no different, as we aim to take a historical perspective on creativity without exhausting the richness of the events, people, and ideas that contributed to its development (if you are interested to know more about this topic do consult Weiner, 2000; Mason, 2003; and Pope, 2005). Importantly, we start from the premise that there is no single, unitary, and final history of creativity to be told. Instead, there are multiple "histories" of creativity with their own angles and perspectives; each one would tell its own narrative. In this chapter, we will thus focus on the historical development of key debates that resonate up to the present day within creativity research. But, first, why does this all matter?

Why History Matters

A great example of why history matters is offered by the word "creativity" itself. The etymological roots of the term take us back to the Latin verb *creare*, which meant bringing something forth – making or producing something. However, this notion was not applied to human creativity for several centuries. Instead, the idea of "creation" was associated with God and the generative powers of nature. As such, the earliest thirteenth-century uses of "create" were in the passive past participle (was created). It is only in the fifteenth century that the present tense (to create) and present participle (creating) of the verb began to be used (Pope, 2005). Thus, creativity was associated with the divine as opposed to the human for hundreds of years. This conception was first challenged in the **Renaissance** and replaced more or less completely during the **Enlightenment**.

The word "creativity" came into being, or at least was first documented, in 1875 in Adolfus William Ward's *History of Dramatic English Literature*, in reference to Shakespeare's "poetic creativity" (see Weiner, 2000, p. 89). The use of this word marked a radical change in our understanding of creating: from something that already happened and was out of reach to an ongoing process and, finally, a more generalizable trait or phenomenon. The word "creativity" was not very popular at first. It took over fifty years and such significant societal transformations, as World War II, for it to enter standard dictionaries and infiltrate languages other than English.

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This brief story of the word "creativity" teaches us several things. First, the history of a phenomenon does not start with the moment it is named; it can (and should) be traced back to other times, words, and belief systems. Second, although we retroactively apply the word "creativity" to great works of the past, the creators of that time and their audiences would likely not understand this concept (Hanchett Hanson, 2015). Third, current studies of creativity should consider the field's proper historical context, as the "hallmark of our modern, secular, democratic, capitalistic society" (Weiner, 2000, p. 1) without, of course, being limited to such societies.

In summary, there are at least three reasons why history matters, briefly summarized below:

1. A historical approach to creativity helps us put things "in perspective" and understand the roots of both old and new debates.
2. This historical study is not only about the past; it is just as relevant to the present and the future. Knowing history allows one to see where a field is and where it is going.
3. History is said to have a tendency to repeat itself. Given the current rate at which the field of creativity research is expanding, a historical perspective can help us detect the difference between old wine being sold in new bottles from actual advances in scholarship.

The Main Historical Narrative

We do have a main narrative about the historical evolution of the idea of creativity. This narrative is rather straightforward (see Dacey, 1999; Kearney, 2009). From **Antiquity** (when the first written histories emerge) to the **Middle Ages** (from the fifth century until Columbus's voyage in 1492) to the Renaissance (a European movement between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries), creative acts were believed to be the outcome of divine inspiration. The Renaissance marked the beginning of the long "transition" from God to human beings. This movement culminated during the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the image of the genius. After World War II, the scientific study of creativity intensified, eventually leading to a better balance between individualistic and social approaches to this phenomenon. The history of creativity thus reflects a long search for suitable explanations for how and why we create. Initially, the answers pointed outside of the person, to God or gods; gradually, the focus became more and more internal (within the abilities and characteristics of the person). In today's global age of connectivity and communication, there may be another great shift slowly underway in how we understand creativity. What are the big landmarks of this long and complex history?

Prehistory

There is little we know about the nature, value, and meaning of creative acts during prehistoric times. What is certain is a fundamental contradiction: Despite a general view

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of societies at the time as being primitive, static, and averse to change, some of the most important creations and inventions in the history of humanity date from that period. These include the domestication of animals, the invention of the alphabet, the creation of cities, and art that lasts to this day. Importantly, it is clear that people at the time saw some creations as valuable enough to be kept and transmitted. It is harder to discern how these achievements were thought about or how creators themselves were treated by others. Most probably, given the first records we have, the very first acts of creativity were seen as divine manifestations. This conception is well established in the Hebrew Bible, which starts with an account of how God created heaven and Earth out of nothing (ex nihilo), demonstrating what certainly would be viewed as a supreme and unparalleled creative power. Since people were made in the image of God, they could participate in His creativity by following the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Human creativity was, in this sense, derivative and limited to strictly following God's instructions (Weiner, 2000, p. 26).

Antiquity

Interestingly, the early Greeks, who are credited with some of the greatest creative feats during **Antiquity**, were reserved when it came to human creativity. Consider the legend of Prometheus. He steals fire to give to humankind and, according to some versions, also teaches people the basic concepts of the arts and sciences. His daring, benevolence, and ingenuity are not celebrated; instead, he is eternally punished by the gods for his disobedience. Prometheus's fate warns of the danger and potential ramifications of being too "creative" and disturbing the universal order. Greek tragedies often emphasized the same message and warned their audience not to take risks or offend the gods. In exchange, the gods were able to inspire people. Homer, for instance, attributed his poetry to the divine, and Plato often pointed to the Muses. In the end, a great ambivalence toward creativity emerges from ancient times: worshipped and dangerous, moral and immoral, harmonious but also possibly disastrous (Mason, 2003).

The Middle Ages

This legacy was carried over to the **Middle Ages** when, at least in Western Europe, it was widely believed that human beings could not truly create; this ability was a prerogative of God alone. And yet, paradoxically, the Church was often a patron of what are today considered to be great creative achievements in sculpture, painting, metalwork, and architecture. The purpose of most of these was the glorification of God and any signs of individuality and authorship were discouraged. Such practices were in place to reflect the collaborative nature of the work, which was often performed in guilds by communities of craftsmen or artisans. In the end, medieval societies were not static but rather in a state of constant transformation, as can be seen by the rapid expansion of cities, technology, and trade.

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The Renaissance

The heights of this cultural progress were reached during the Renaissance, the first historical era to celebrate the creative ideal and relocate it from God to men (unfortunately, women remained largely excluded). The spirit of this time blurred the line between the human and the divine. Several key inventions, such as the printing press, led to an unprecedented ability to transmit ideas and gain new knowledge. It was also a time of invention and exploration (for example, the discovery of the New World), of ingenuity and trade (anticipating the birth of capitalism), and one that encouraged individual thinking and hard work (through the Protestant Reformation). The Renaissance made it possible for creators to be acknowledged and paid for their services. As such, it cultivated creative productions in the arts and beyond. Unsurprisingly, some of the greatest creators at the time, such as Leonardo da Vinci, were polymathic geniuses. A new conception of genius, as we will see later, had its roots in this period.

The Enlightenment and Romanticism

The Enlightenment radically changed the landscape for creativity. A new belief in the power of human reason and capacity to change the world offered the foundation for a much more individual notion of creativity. The idea of progress, in particular, scientific progress, became very popular, and this fueled the Industrial Revolution and the major technological and societal breakthroughs that accompanied it. At the same time, the accumulation of wealth, even if acquired through the exploitation of others or of natural resources, came to be seen as a virtue. The ideology of individualism gained currency. Problem solving became a paradigmatic way of expressing one's creativity; the authority of the Bible and its views of creation were fundamentally challenged (Dacey, 1999). However, the celebration of reason, order, and progress left many people at the time unsatisfied. This discontent gave birth to the current of Romanticism, arguably one of the eras that had the deepest impact on modern conceptions of creativity. In contrast to the rational "light" of the Enlightenment, Romanticism emphasized torment, unhinged fantasy, and disorder (Negus and Pickering, 2004). It also established the genius as a natural category that was soon pathologized (think about the mad genius).

Contemporary Approaches

Contemporary culture is much more skeptical about glorified images of the genius. In fact, in an age of mechanical reproduction, the expression of creativity can be more associated with the mixing and remixing of existing cultural elements. The relatively easy access to culture led to a much wider "democratization" of creativity than at any other time in history. The distinction between "low" and "high" culture became blurred. Multiculturalism brought us much closer in contact with others and otherness (not necessarily turning us into more tolerant or inclusive beings and societies, however, as many events of the early

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twenty-first century illustrate). Speed, connectivity, and traveling define this day and age and require new, more distributed and participatory ways of conceptualizing creativity (Glăveanu, 2014; Clapp, 2016). "The Internet has reinforced the contemporary idea of creativity coming from anyone, anywhere, at any time" (Weiner, 2000, p. 107). At the same time, it has legitimized the phenomenon of ephemeral popularity or instant fame, as audiences themselves became global and, to a large extent, anonymous. Creative work is recognized today as very often being collaborative, not always out of preference but necessity. Consider, for example, the many different ways that the average person may be creative in day-to-day life, such as adding a witty comment to a Facebook post, creating a variant on an existing meme, or posting an original photo on Instagram. These creative acts (most equivalent to mini-c, or personal creativity that may not be valued by others; Beghetto and Kaufman, 2009; 2014) build off of existing cultural expressions and shared language.

Before ending this brief, chronological presentation of the "main narrative," it is important to stress that this history is fundamentally Western and, to a large extent, European and American. The West gave birth to the word "creativity" (a word of Latin origin), shaped our understanding of this phenomenon in its image, and "exported" it to other cultural spaces around the world. Unfortunately, in constructing themselves as "inventors" of creativity and its special heirs, Western societies deliberately depicted other people and other cultures as non-creative, traditional, or stuck in time. If creativity is a modern value, as we noted at the start, it is also a sign of power to be able to decide who and what is "creative." Eastern conceptions of creativity date back to Confucius (Niu, 2012) and often emphasize different components, such as harmony, societal benefit, and incremental or adaptive advances (Niu and Kaufman, 2012). Such a focus, although acknowledged in Western studies, is less often part of the dialogue about creativity. It is also important to note that the perspectives and accomplishments of female creators have often been minimized in traditional past approaches (Helson, 1990); we hope that, in moving forward, the narrative of creativity will continue to expand and include a much more diverse array of voices.

Histories of Creativity

Historical narratives about creativity are neither unitary not singular. In fact, there are many other "stories" that could be told about the ways in which past ideas and practices feed into today's conceptions. A careful study of different historical strands could shed new light on the many debates embedded within creativity research (see Glăveanu, 2013, 2016). Among them, three oppositions stand out due to their implications for how we define, measure, and enhance creativity. These concern the following aspects:

1. Creative people: **Individual** and/or **Social**?
2. Creative artifacts: **Novelty** and/or **Value**?
3. Creative process: **Ideas** and/or **Action**?

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Although they constitute points of tension in the field today, each one of these pairs has their own histories, which often intersect. We will consider each in turn, pointing to the continuities (and discontinuities) between past and present thoughts on these issues. Our Conclusion will look toward the future.

Individual and/or Social

The question of whether creativity comes from within or from beyond the person is as old as the history of human civilization. Scientific research into the creative process, done soon after World War II, is based on the assumption that creativity emerges from within the individual, more specifically, from a dynamic interaction between cognition, affect, and purpose (see Gruber, 1988). This dynamic is shaped by the environment, particularly social relations, but creativity fundamentally remains an individual property or trait. And yet, as argued before, this widespread belief would have made little sense a few centuries ago. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the first conceptions of creativity viewed it as originating completely from outside of the person, within the realm of the divine.

How did we come to prioritize the individual over his or her environment? The history of thinking about creativity can be largely seen as one of gradual individualization, starting from the Renaissance, accelerating during the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, and peaking within the neoliberal, consumerist societies of today. This process has been marked, in recent centuries, by macro-social changes (e.g., the emergence of an individual rights doctrine enforced during the American and French Revolutions), and the gradual establishment of individual recognition practices (e.g., granting copyright as a personal economic incentive to create). This individualization is matched, in recent decades, by a certain degree of “democratization” of creative potential. We have evolved from a world in which only God creates to one that glorified creative geniuses to our current common belief that everyone has the potential to be creative in some way (Weiner, 2000, p. 257).

These debates about whether or not human beings create and, if they do, whether all or only a few are destined to be creative, are crystallized in the history of genius. This notion of genius, used today to designate eminent forms of creativity (or intelligence or leadership; see Simonton, 2009), represented for centuries a way of speaking about creativity before the term was invented. Geniuses were historically revered due to their evidenced capacity to almost singlehandedly revolutionize society and transform culture. From the eighteenth century onwards, geniuses became associated with “individuality, insight, outstanding ability and, in particular, fertility” of the mind (Mason, 2003, p. 111). Just as with creativity, this (radical) individualization was, however, a historical invention.

The roots of genius are in the Latin word, *genio*, which translates to creator or begetter. Interestingly, though, the creator was not a person but rather a guardian spirit (*daimon*) assigned to the person and meant to govern his fortunes and protect the family home (Negus and Pickeri 2004). Thus, genius was initially connected to individuals and families but did not belong to the individual. The internalization of this notion was gradual and aided in the seventeenth century by the linguistic proximity between *genio* and *ingenium* or innate talent

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(Negus and Pickering, 2004). Indeed, by the nineteenth century, especially through the work of Francis Galton (1874), genius became a hereditary category (nature) and the role of the environment (nurture) was minimized. Not all scholars at the time agreed with this assessment; William James was one of the first scientists to argue for an interaction between genetic heredity and environment in the makeup of geniuses (Dacey, 1999). Calls to consider genius in more social terms and as an ideological belief (used to promote an elitist view of certain people or groups within society) continue to this day (Negus and Pickering, 2004).

Another factor pointing toward the internalization of genius has historically been the close connection between this phenomenon and madness. Mental illness was often used to account for the creative achievements of great artists, musicians, and writers, primarily by nineteenth-century authors such as Augustin Morel, Cesare Lombroso, and Max Nordau (G. Becker, 2014). Once more, the history of these associations is much older since, as Eysenck (1995) noted, there was no distinction made in Latin between madness and inspiration, which was often seen as a form of demonic possession. Romantics associated the individual genius with mental illness to such an extent that some Romantic poets and artists were known to embrace madness in part because they felt compelled to do it (Sawyer, 2012); how else could they demonstrate their creativity? G. Becker (2014) also attributed the image of the mad genius to Romanticism. He argued that the connection between creativity and mental illness is not entirely fabricated and that a good amount of current research today connects genius with manic-depressive symptoms or mood disorders. Although we acknowledge some studies supporting the mad-genius stereotype (Simonton, 2014a, 2014b), much past research has been strongly challenged (Schlesinger, 2009, 2012). The general consensus is that the connection between creativity and mental illness is slight at best and much more nuanced and context-dependent than previously assumed (Kaufman, 2016b).

The decade of the 1950s proposed a much broader conception of creativity as a widespread process and a personal trait that can and should be educated. Guilford's (1950) APA address emerged at a time in which the scientific climate in the United States were ripe for studies of little-c or mundane creativity (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009) and creative potential. Meanwhile, the sociopolitical climate in the United States, with the Cold War and competition with the Russians to explore space, led to an emphasis on giftedness and creativity in the educational system (Cropley, 2015). As creativity became more egalitarian and moved away from belonging only to the elite, the association with mental illness became weaker (Silvia and Kaufman, 2010; Kaufman, 2014). Further, more attention was paid to possible positive mental-health benefits of creativity (Barron, 1963). Creativity grew to be celebrated not only as an individual quality but also as a personal responsibility, particularly in the West. People were implicitly expected to cultivate their creative potential, to live a successful life and contribute to society. This discourse fits the broader cultural landscape in America, defined by the values of individualism, industriousness, and the image of the self-made man.

However, this democratization of creativity did not take into account the role of the social environment except as something to be confronted and defied (see Sternberg, 2018, for more on creativity as defiance). It was not until the 1980s that more systemic or distributed

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conceptions of creativity began to flourish (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Today's interconnected world offers a new opportunity to address this dichotomy and "socialize" not only our practices of creativity but also our theories of it.

Novelty and/or Value

After 1950, creativity grew as a topic for academic study. It has been explicitly defined more or less consistently in terms of two components: novelty/originality and value/appropriateness (see Runco and Jaeger, 2012). These two dimensions are considered equally important by researchers although, in practice, there is a tendency (at least within Western societies) for novelty/originality to be the object of more research studies (Kaufman, 2016a) and to be more closely aligned with lay beliefs (Sternberg, 1985) than value/appropriateness. Of course, this will depend on the domain in which creativity is expressed.

The arts and the sciences, for example, are two broad domains of creativity that offer distinct views of the creative process and its products. Consider the arts – they are based on divergence and self-expression, highly likely to produce novelty, and can be messy and unpredictable. The sciences are more likely to gravitate toward convergence and effective problem-solving, potentially practical outcomes, functionality, and orderliness (Kaufman and Baer, 2002; Cropley and Cropley, 2010). The historical debate between Romanticism and the Enlightenment continues to play out in our understanding of artistic and scientific creativity.

If we move further back in time, we can notice that the first question that animated this debate was whether creating anything new was even possible. As mentioned earlier, the dominant conception during Antiquity and the Middle Ages was that God (or the gods) is the true source of novelty and that human activity is merely a reproduction of His creation. For Aristotle, arts and crafts were essentially imitative; his teacher, Plato, went even further by postulating that art is a copy of a copy since it tries to imitate nature, which already imitates eternal ideas (Weiner, 2000). These views make the biblical feat of God, of creating the world out of nothingness, even more extraordinary. In contrast, human activity was reduced to a derivative form. There is "nothing new under the sun" (1:9), claims the author of Ecclesiastes, and striving to produce novelties only reveals our "vanity."

In contrast, today "making the new is our culture's agenda" (Weiner, 2000, p. 98). So, how exactly did we get from believing novelty is impossible to placing it as the cornerstone of our societies in many domains? The key to understanding this evolution resides in the notion of self-expression and its glorification during the Romantic period (Negus and Pickering, 2004). Romanticism exulted the human capacity to imagine and, above all, the possibility of a creative – not only reproductive – imagination (Glăveanu, 2017a). Self-expression was infused by both imagination and affect and was considered essential for creativity in the arts. Later on, at the dawn of Modernism, this focus on self-expression gave way to novelty; for example, Impressionist painters started being concerned with the novel aspects of their work and with visibly breaking with the old traditions of the Academy.

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More contemporary echoes of these concerns can be found in the work of Maslow (1943) and his ideas about self-actualization. The actualized self experiences life fully, spontaneously, and independently of others' opinions and views. It is, ultimately, a person who embraces novelty, lives a psychologically healthy life, and is capable of acting creatively in relation to both self and others.

More contemporary associations with creative value move us away from the sphere of individual well-being and health and toward capitalist concerns for production and consumption. Much of creativity's current popularity is its perceived contribution mainly to the economy, including creative economy, and rapidly evolving technology. This market orientation seeks novelty inasmuch as it can attract interest and produce tangible rewards – in other words, as long as it sells. At the same time, creative contributions that are highly original run the risk of being ahead of their time and only appreciated in retrospect, whereas small incremental advances can be more profitable in the short term (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz, 2001; 2003).

The increased focus on value/appropriateness is only one of many shifting perspectives on the creative product throughout history. Why do these historical considerations matter today? It is because our contemporary definition of creativity is not accidental and neither are the measures we use to evaluate creative work (see Glăveanu, 2017c). Divergent thinking is quintessentially a task aimed at revealing self-expression and spontaneity. Converging-thinking tasks (as well as related insight and problem-solving tests) take a more orderly and oftentimes logical approach. It should not surprise us, then, if the creativity we measure with one differs from the creativity we identify with the other. In the end, creativity requires both divergent and convergent processes. The key question, from a historical perspective, is which "legacy" are we actually continuing and with what consequences?

Ideas and/or Action

The biblical story of Genesis begins with God creating the world through the power of His word. This story illustrates the divine prerogative of creating something out of nothing; it also points to the importance of speech for the act of creation itself. God's word precedes His actions in His creative process. Indeed, although in a completely different context, we still uphold that creativity starts from an idea and is usually communicated through language (which can be words but also musical notes, dance moves, or numbers and symbols). The popular metaphor of the lightbulb, often associated with creativity, is based on this assumption: Creativity begins in one's mind in the form of insight. Broadly speaking, to reach creative achievement, this insight needs additional components, such as the knowledge and experience to nurture the idea and the actions needed to implement and produce the idea.

This debate between prioritizing ideas versus embodied action – between head versus hands – can be traced back to centuries-long discussions about arts and crafts. The arts

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