Review of: "Why the Standard Definition of Creativity Fails to Capture the Creative Act"

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More Support for Personal Creativity and Internal Frames of Reference: A Review of "Why the Standard Definition of Creativity Fails to Capture the Creative Act"

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Abraham (2023) offers an interesting point of view in “Why the Standard Definition of Creativity Fails to Capture the Creative Act.” Her claim that “employing external frames of reference when assessing the creative product has been erroneously applied to understand the creative mind” is exactly right. She also claimed that internal frames of reference have "largely been ignored," which may be an exaggeration. Indeed, it seems to me that her effort represents the latest in an ongoing battle between theories favoring internal vs external frames of reference. In what follows I will put Abraham’s proposal into a broader context and cite others who have participated in this same battle. Certainly internal frames of reference have not received their due, but the context I present suggests that “are largely ignored” should instead be “are too often ignored.” There is also at least one theory of creativity that respects both internal and external frames of reference. It is summarized below and suggests that external frames may depend on internal frames. There is also a suggestion, toward the end of my comments, that care must be taken with dichotomies.

Abraham (2023) herself discusses Stein’s (1953) distinction of internal vs. external frames of reference, which of course is a part of the “broader context,” albeit now 70 years old. Boden’s (2014) distinction of *psychological* (or individual) creativity vs *historical* creativity is also cited and obviously is a more recent parallel with internal vs external frames of reference. Abraham does not mention the distinction between *personal creativity* and *social recognition* (Runco, 1996a, 2020). Note that it is not social *creativity* but is instead social *recognition.* That is because, in the theory of personal creativity, social recognition and impact occur late in the process and not really a part of creativity. Recognition follows the actual creation. A definition of creativity that requires social recognition (and external frames) conflates creativity with things that are actually not required of the creative process (Runco, 1995). Along the same lines, social recognition may be offered after creation--but it may not occur at all. Personal creativity may be expressed and shared, and when it is,

sometimes there is social recognition, but personal creativity always occurs first and can only be understood by appreciating an internal frame of reference. It is important even if it is never shared nor socially recognized. That is because creativity is good for individuals, even when they do not share their experience or thinking. Creativity may be inextricable from self-actualization (the epitome of psychological health), for example, and it helps in most expressions of *everyday creativity* (Runco & Richards, 1997). Creativity is involved when individuals construct meaning and is instrumental in authentic learning (Piaget, 1972; Runco, 2003). It is authentic in the sense that there is true understanding and not just memorization.

The idea that personal creativity precedes social recognition seems to be consistent with Brandt's (2021) ideas of *making* and *reception*. Here again there is a broader context. Making vs reception may be the latest way of expressing a key point in the various Commentaries of the 1995 *Creativity Research Journal.* Those Commentaries (e.g., Amabile, 1995; Policastro & Gardner, 1995; Simonton, 1995; Sternberg, 1995) were reactions to Kasof's (1995) attributional theory of creativity, which put all of the emphasis on reception. It defines creativity in terms of attributions and only recognizes socially shared creativity which has an impact on some audience. Several of the Commentaries, including my own, made the point about making being quite different from reception, although the labels used in 1995 were different (e.g., *insight* vs *impact* instead of making and reception). What is most important is that it is one thing to create, but something quite different to promote the insight or idea and receive recognition because of it. Kasof actually went as far as to recommend that creators practice *impression management* so their making and insights would be more likely to receive the desired attributions. This was criticized because time invested in impression management is time away from creating.

Making and reception are implicit in Csikszentmalyi's (1990) systems theory. In this theory an individual might have a creative insight, which might be shared with an audience, and in particular the other individuals working in the same *field*. Some insights are highly influential and eventually also influence the entire*domain*, which of course represents an external frame of reference. For Csikszentmihalyi, all of this must occur or there is no creativity. Early on, when I first outlined the theory of personal creativity, I proposed the opposite and held that only individuals are creative. I described subsequent processes (sometimes leading to recognition) as outside of, and probably reactions to, the actual creation. More recently Beghetto and I proposed that the individual and the audience might both be creative. Our interest was in education and we described how students might be creative, and how teachers might need to be creative as well to find meaning in the original ideas shared by students (Runco & Beghetto, 2018). Perhaps both internal and external frames of reference are sometimes a part of the process. (We called them *primary* and *secondary creativity*.) Some of this may sound a bit like Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) systems theory, but he did not attribute creativity until there was social recognition, whereas the theory of personal creativity posits creativity to what the individual does, regardless of external recognition. In Runco and Beghetto's (2018) theory of primary and secondary creativity, an audience might also be creative as it constructs its interpretations, but this is not required for personal creativity.

Abraham (2023) very reasonably ties Csikzentmihalyi's (1990) systems theory to Big C creativity. The concept of Big C creativity, like systems theory, is that it is misleading (Runco, 2014a; also see Merrotsy, 2013). Big C is ostensibly distinct from little c creativity, the implication being that people have one or the other. In actuality, Big C and little c represent a false dichotomy. Creative talents are widely distributed, and thus categorizing them into Big and little c

overlooks most creativity. Even when mini- and pro-c are included, there is still categorization, while creative talent really takes a multitude of forms and is much more continuous than categorical. Someone might think Big and little c are just convenient labels, but labels can be misleading, and there are much more descriptive terms to use instead of Big C and little c creativity (e.g., socially-recognized creativity, historical creativity, personal creativity, everyday creativity). Then there is the fact that someone with Big C creativity very likely also has little c creativity, at least when little c includes personal and everyday creativity. At one point (e.g., childhood), eminent creators only had little c. So again, Big and little c are not really entirely distinct.

I appreciate Abraham's (2023) reminder of the problems of an external frame of reference, which is why I wrote that the internal frames are "too often being ignored." That being said, I was given her article as part of an invitation for a review, so I should strive for balance in my comments. The contexts I summarized above offer even more support for her basic position, beyond that which she herself marshals; but I did have several questions with her article. First, the discussion of self-reports reminded me of the value of the *think aloud* (e.g, Khandwalla, 1995) and *feeling of knowing* (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987) research that has been done on creativity. These attempted to get at the creative experience. Might they complement other kinds of self-reports of creative experiences?

More critically, the summary of divergent thinking testing may be a straw argument. Of the several hundred studies of divergent thinking I have read over a four decade period, a minority have used raters' judgments (see Runco, 1991, 2013). True, the handful of researchers who have relied on judges to rate ideas have indeed exaggerated the value of reception and an external frame of reference, but more often than not divergent thinking tests have been scored for something much more objective, such as statistical infrequency. Interestingly, this is almost moot at this point, given that LLM and semantic distance methods are now being used to score divergent thinking (Acar et al., 2023). These models are often validated against human ratings, so at the risk of contradicting myself, perhaps Abraham's (2023) description will turn out to be valid.

Another question concerns her discussion of value, and in particular the transition from effectiveness, utility, and adaptiveness–which constitute one side of the standard definition (Runco & Jaeger, 2012)--to value. Value is a difficult thing to operationalize and there are issues, as the detailed debate between Harrington (2018) and Weisberg (2015, 2018) shows. My question is about criticisms of value being applied to the other ways that effectiveness, fit, utility, and so have been associated with creativity. It does not seem fair to dismiss them, even if value is problematic. In other words, value is a relatively easy target, compared with the other ways that the second part of the standard definition has been described (i.e., effectiveness, utility, appropriateness). Effectiveness can be operationalized in problem solving when an idea successfully solves the problem, for example, and Tsao, Ting, and Johnson (2019) proposed a nice operational perspective on utility, as well. My collaborators and I have developed reliable measures of appropriateness (Runco & Charles, 1993; Runco, Illies, & Eisenmann, 2005). The point is that value might be questioned but this does not bring all of the possible criteria (effectiveness, appropriateness, utility) into question.

Relatedly, Brandt (2021) is quoted on the premise that "a definition needs to be all encompassing." Is this really necessary? An all-encompassing definition would be handy, but it is possible that creativity is a subject matter that does

not allow it. The science of creativity is unlike all other scientific topics, and the methods and the conventions may need to be different too (Runco, 1996b). It may be that an all-encompassing definition is not useful nor possible. I have mentioned a work-around quite a few times. I am referring to the possibility of avoiding the noun “creativity” in scientific work and instead only using the adjective (Runco, 2014b). This would require that there is specificity in discussion of creative traits, creative achievement, creative products, creative ideas, creative processes, creative styles, creative places, and so on, each of which is creative, but creative in different ways. Perhaps that is the best way to apply the concept of creativeness while at the same time allowing for diverse expression. Wording this as a question, “isn’t it better to stay true to the subject matter than to rely on one definition that does not do justice to the subject matter? Look at it this way: The science of creativity is at least 70 years old, maybe more (e.g., Patrick, 1935; for a history, see Albert & Runco, 1999), and there is little consensus about a definition (cf Runco & Jaeger, 2012). That may be because creativity is in reality such that all-encompassing definition would do more harm than good.

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