

# CREATIVITY THROUGH TIME – EVOLUTIVE RETROSPECTIVE OF THE CONCEPT

**Andreia Valqueresma, Joaquim Luís Coimbra**

Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Portugal

pdpsi10041@fpce.up.pt, jcoimbra@fpce.up.pt

## ABSTRACT

Although the study of creativity goes back to the beginning of the XXth century, with authors such as Vygotsky approaching the theme, only in recent years it has been assumed as a prominent subject in the scientific realm. For this progress greatly contributed the studies of Torrance, Mednick, Czsikszentmihalyi, Gardner and Sternberg, who became involved in the production of theoretical frameworks and in the construction of instruments that allow the assessment of a construct that holds as much of complexity as of multidimensionality. This diversity, although constituting one of the most challenging and enriching aspects of creativity, has caused a counterproductive effect at the scientific investigation level, given the difficulty of finding a widely accepted conception by the scientific community. Therefore, we can observe the production of heterogeneous assessment tools that evaluate creativity from manifold perspectives. Consequently we can find instruments that evaluate the process of creativity as divergent thinking (Almeida & Ribeiro, 1992; Guilford, 1958; Torrance, 1966), as the ability to find problems (Getzels & Czsikszentmihalyi, 1976; Sternberg, 1988), as a personality feature, interest and attitude (Covington, 1966; Urban & Gellen, 1995), as a creative product (Amabile, 1983; Archambault & Gubbin, 1980; Reis & Renzulli, 1991; Westberg, 1990), as a self-evaluatable aspect (Colangelo et al. 1992; O'Neil, Abedi & Spielberg, 1994; Richards et al., 1988), and also as a structural element of the lifelong cycle (Schaefer, 197; Amabile, 1989).

Exploring the intricacies of creativity we draw an evolutive review of the concept and construct, aiming to establish a sound theoretical base, which will allow a deeper exploration of creativity. Hence, we hope to encourage future research, highlighting the reflexes that a critical and profound understanding of creativity can produce in significant and diverse areas of human psychological functioning and society in general.

**Key words:** Creativity, evolutive review

## INTRODUCTION

In a society that is constantly changing, creativity may prove to be a critical tool for success. If we consider that, since childhood, the human psychological subject is confronted with the necessity of solving problems, being compelled to produce a continuous flow of original ideas, to deal with daily changes and constantly resorting to

creative strategies for problem solving, one understands the pertinence that this concept may assume, as well as the influence that its profound understanding may exert, both at the individual and societal levels.

Nevertheless the unanimous acceptance of the importance of creativity for the human psychological development, it continues to be a construct that escapes a consensual definition. Therefore, we attempted some clarification searching for the etymological origins of the concept of creativity where creativity is mentioned as a derivative from the Latin *creare* (meaning to give existence). It was initially linked to the divine figure, which justified that for centuries it had been replaced by the term imagination, fostering the ambiguity that still tends to be associated with both concepts. Moreover, this perspective fed, at the same time that legitimized, a conception of creativity as something that comes from nothing, although, in our opinion, creativity is submerged in contexts, emerging from precedent human creations.

## EVOLUTIVE REVIEW

In this sense, an evolutive review of the concept, grounded upon the contributions of Csikszentmihalyi (1999), Gardner (1996), Kegan (1982), Piaget (1945), Sternberg and Lubart (1988, 1991) and Vygotsky (1917, 1930), seems to be a reasonable pathway towards the comprehension of the relevance of the context in creativity.

Based on the concept of creativity as a reflection of any human act that creates something new, regardless of what is created is a physical object or an emotional or mental construct that lives within the person who created it and is known only by him/her, Vygotsky (1930), faces creativity as a superior psychological process that stands for its complexity and unique capability to conduct the human psychological subject to the elaboration of new and intricate structures, starting from the combination of pre-existing elements. The dialectical relationship between imagination and creativity is shown in the conception of a developmental pathway that results from the communication between logical thinking and imaginary thought, where the individual moves towards a progressively more differentiated organization of the mind.

Consistent with its cutting edge position, Vygotsky (1930) already alluded to the influence of context on creativity, highlighting the crucial need for a challenging environment, which would lead the individual to action and reflection, justifying the need to be creative. Above all, he advanced with the influence of social and cultural factors, asserting that any creative individual is a product of his/her time and context, reinforcing that, in order for any invention or scientific discovery to reveal, psychological and material conditions have to be assembled in advance. Additionally, Vygotsky (1917) allows us to equate the relationship between creativity and learning, centered in the zone of proximal development. This notion of development, basic and distinctive to the theoretical perspectives hitherto made, enables us to draw significant conclusions about the interrelationship between creativity and education, since it is through social interaction with other individuals (that possess a more extensive and diverse experience) that the learning process will progress.

From another perspective, Piaget (1945) presents a developmental theory where the place of imagination (and subsequently creativity) is in the realm of impossible, being crucial to reach a superior cognitive and psychological functioning. Eventually, it'll be through imagination that the range of possibilities opens up before the individual, being that capacity directly proportional to the formal intelligence level achieved.

Consequently, creativity has the power to open to the subject horizons up till then unknown, which, combined with the intellectual functioning will enhance a superior cognitive development. Accordingly, it is impossible to omit the importance that education can play in developing creativity, since for Piaget (1945) it's a key moment in development, donating education a major role in the free expression of creative thought. Yet in the developmental theories domain, Kegan (1982) elaborated a constructive-developmental model where the self integrates cognition and emotion, underlining the effect of a culture of embeddedness on the individual continuous process of meaning making. Approaching creativity as a construct deeply associated with a qualitatively more complex functioning he considers that the context will determine the majority of creative manifestations, since it is the context that possesses the ability to make creativity visible, as well as the capacity to recognize creativity, which will function as a motivational factor, determinant for its evolution. In short, this neo-Piagetian vision of development permits us to look creativity with a lens more suited to its complexities, imposing a conceptual matrix able to integrate them into the errant path of human development without losing its internal consistency and coherence.

Continuing to trace out the theoretical contributions to the study of creativity in psychology, the functionalist perspectives express the desire to find an explanation, endemically quantitative, to the cognitive process of creation. Guilford (1950) first, and Torrance (1975) after, highlighted the definition of creativity as a process of problem solving, discerned from creative imagination (that was seen as a more or less unconscious process of creating imaginary works). Fully involved in the study of intelligence, Guilford (1967) builds the structural model of intelligence, emphasizing the dominance of divergent thinking in creativity, seen as a reflection of fluency, flexibility, originality and realization capacity of the subject. Continuing the legacy of Guilford (1967), Torrance (1975) developed the most widely used test of creativity: Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. Nonetheless, this and other functionalist tests reflect an excessive valuation of quantity over quality of creative production, which, in our view, is constituted as something too crucial to be relegated to the background.

Exploring now the psychoanalytic perspectives of creativity, Mednick (1962) emerges as one of the most important contemporary authors. Leaning over the understanding of the creative process, he sees it as something that is expressed by the arrangement of associative elements into new combinations. In this light, he built the Remote Associations Test, whose basic theoretical foundation is that creative thinking is derived from pre-existing information from which there will be established multiple associations, whose quality will be directly proportional to the distance of the elements involved. Mednick (1962) believes that the subject's degree of knowledge and access to information will be key factors in its associative ability, as well as fluency, cognitive styles and the type of issue raised.

Advancing to the exploration of the cognitive perspectives we can appreciate the contributions of authors like Gardner (1996), Sternberg and Lubart (1991), and, Csikszentmihalyi (1999), who strove to define consistent theoretical models where creativity is identified as a key element of human development.

Approaching Gardner's (1996) conception we can observe how clearly he states the dialectical relationship between creativity and intelligence, considering both at the same level of importance, in what human development is concerned. Hence, Gardner (1996) promotes a systematic reading of the creative phenomenon based on the assertion that *"creativity goes beyond the cognitive-psychological boundaries"* (Gardner, 1988, p.305), so that its understanding can only be achieved recognizing the influences of such factors

as personality, motivation, individual style, but also the social and cultural context in which it manifests.

On the other hand, Sternberg & Lubart (1991) addressed creativity establishing a conceptual parallel with the notion of investment, considering that creative thinkers are like good investors: they sell high and buy low. Thus, profoundly concerned with separating creativity and intelligence and reflecting the cognitivist paradigm in which they are placed, they defend creativity results from the combination of: intellectual abilities, knowledge, styles of thinking, personality, motivation and environment. Nevertheless, creativity is hypothesized to involve more than a simple sum of a person's level, on each component.

More recently, Csikszentmihalyi (1999), developed a systems perspective for creativity, characterized by embracing individual and social systems, considering creativity as a social and cultural event rather than as an exclusively psychological phenomenon. In this sense he defines three systems: the domain (personified by culture), the field (reflecting society), and the individual (influenced by its personal background), concluding that creativity is directly influenced by culture and society. In summary, the optimal operation of the systems will be achieved when the creative subject, reconciling all the differences between systems and internalizing them into their operating mechanisms and structures, is able to overcome the barriers of intra-individual cognitive functioning towards the social environment, obtaining recognition and support from peers. Therefore, according to this perspective, creativity is as multidimensional and complex phenomenon that surpasses the limits of individual talent and ability. The author accentuates that, ultimately, *"is the community and not the individual who makes creativity manifest itself"* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 333).

Summarizing, all the different theoretical conceptions presented before underline the difficulty in defining creativity and, consequently, in achieving a coherent and unique view of creativity, a complex and multidimensional construct. Yet, the role of the context seems to be consensual amongst the authors. Hence, we believe, education and creativity play a profound and intricate relation that cannot be overlooked.

As a result of these thoughts we are led to question how important is creativity for the individual and for contemporary societies?

If we consider that, nowadays, society lives under the technicality patronage, openly promoting innovation and entrepreneurship as panaceas for success, we cannot but consider the inevitable contribution that creativity can give. Otherwise, how else can the psychological human subject face the challenges of modern society, constantly impelling him towards novelty? Not seldom, enforced novelty, a de-historicized mode of an utilitarian use of innovation, in the business and political discourses, supported upon a logic of programmed obsolescence?

Eventually, after the crusades of the defenders of the human capital theory, of the bet on lifelong training, of the pressures for productivity and competitiveness, creativity seems to be a last hope for the rhetoric economicist discourses of today. Almost as if it was the only tool that can ensure triumph against all odds in the competitive world we live in, creativity corrupts itself as value deteriorates as a concept and tends to dissociate itself from intra and interpersonal psychological dynamics theoretically founded and methodologically enforced. Above all, we have witnessed profound social changes that may be pushing the current socio-cultural-economic model to the abyss, as a reflection of his inability to continue to provide credible answers to the challenges of the modern

world. So it seems legit to ask at what cost has creativity, apparently, become the last stronghold of survival?

## CONCLUSION

Considering that creativity has become the *pivot* of a belief system that claims spontaneity and that underlines the asphyxiating action of school (Hameline, 1973), it appears unavoidable to reflect about creativity and education. Taking into account the fact that creativity should be envisaged as a continuous exercise into the future, we face an era in which education experiences the need to reformulate its paradigms, policies, politics, culture and pedagogical practices.

Therefore, the creative reconstructive exploration strategies appear as a viable alternative towards the promotion of the diversity and complexity of the human psychological subject as developing in context.

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