

Comment on “The Psychology of Creativity: A Critical Reading” by Vlad Petre Glăveanu

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I applaud Glăveanu’s attempts to shake things up and introduce some much-needed disruption into the study of creativity. Glăveanu is a “big thinker” and he is correct to worry about the growing fragmentation of the field. I share his concern that the so-called “social psychology of creativity” really isn’t all that social. Most researchers and theorists continue to decontextualize creativity, giving little attention to the cultural and environmental factors that contribute to creativity of performance. Yet Glăveanu also presents some arguments with which I disagree. Most striking is his apparent misunderstanding of the purpose and functioning of the Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT). In addition, I am less surprised than is Glăveanu about the current state of our field. The same narrowing of research questions plagues every branch of the study of psychology. However, the tides may be changing. At the forefront of a reform movement are a number of creativity theorists and journal editors. My own hope is that as researchers are given license to expand their work to include a wide variety of experimental designs, methodologies and contexts, they will adopt as their core mission the promotion of the growth of creativity at the individual, group, societal and multi-cultural levels.

Each academic year, I teach a seminar on the Psychology of Creativity designed for upper-level undergraduate psychology majors. Despite the fact that I have offered this course for nearly three decades, it never gets old for me. I revel in the opportunity to rediscover the theories and research through my novice students’ eyes. And most importantly, I look forward to their invariably insightful comments as they spend the semester exploring issues of definition and measurement and read the now classic contributions of seminal figures like Guilford, Koestler, Kubie, Mednick and Skinner coupled with the cutting-edge work of contemporary researchers and theorists. Unencumbered by years of indoctrination in the field, it is as if my students cut directly through the jargon,

assumptions and methodological and theoretical trappings to arrive at the crux of the matter: The grand questions to be investigated. And, as part of this process, they wonder aloud why the creativity experts “out there” have neglected to explore many of the issues that they find to be so pressing.

In many respects, my reading of the paper authored by Vlad Glăveanu brings me this same kind of pleasure – the opportunity to view the study of the psychology of creativity with fresh eyes. While I am heading into what will probably be my final decade of work in this research area, Glăveanu’s career is just beginning; and I applaud his attempt to shake things up and introduce some much-needed disruption into our field. Right from the start, he has shown himself to be a “big” thinker who, like many of my students, has an uncanny ability to make his way through all the mire to see the forest for the trees. Unlike my students, however, Glăveanu is far from an unformed newcomer. He knows the literature especially well and yet, unlike many of the rest of us, he has somehow managed to avoid many of the limiting and sometimes even erroneous assumptions that underlie much of the work in the field.

In fact, some of the criticisms Glăveanu offers are echoed in my own writing. For example, when Teresa Amabile and I were invited to write for the Annual Review of Psychology, we knew all too well that the construction of a comprehensive review would be daunting, difficult and incredibly time consuming. But we accepted the challenge because we viewed it as an opportunity to, at least in some small way, redirect the trajectory of the field. Our primary message in that paper (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010) was, in fact, that amid the virtual explosion of topics, perspectives, and methodologies in the creativity literature, there seem to be few, if any, “big” questions being pursued by a critical mass of researchers. And we went on to point out that investigators in one subfield often seem entirely unaware of advances in another.

Glăveanu and I are in agreement when it comes to concerns about the growing fragmentation of the field and we also agree that much of what pass as social psychological systems approaches to the study of creativity are not at all social. Instead, the bulk of this work is still very much decontextualized with little attention given to the creative milieu, the cultural and environmental factors beyond the creator him or herself, that contribute to creativity of performance (see Hennessey, 2003). Yes, there are many points on which we agree. Yet Glăveanu also presents some arguments that I find to be flawed. Most striking is his apparent misunderstanding of the purpose and functioning of the Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT). The CAT was never intended to serve as a stand-alone hallmark of creativity. Instead, Amabile (1982) offers two complementary definitions

of creativity, one operational (and grounded in the CAT) and the other conceptual. The operationalization of creativity focuses on product creativity, but never is the process that went into producing that product or the individual who engaged in that process discounted in any way. In fact, in one series of studies (Hennessey, 1994), CAT techniques were found to yield reliable assessments of the creative process; and ratings of process creativity made by one group of judges were highly correlated with a second group of judges' ratings of the creativity of finished products. Creative outcomes are seen as resulting from an intersection of a creator's domain knowledge, creativity-type skills and task motivation. Attention is placed on products because they are tangible hallmarks of creativity (or lack thereof). But the creation of these products would not be possible were it not for the fact that an individual brought to the table a unique constellation of skills, motivations and insights, all within the broader context of a classroom, or workplace or other historical and cultural milieu of some kind. And, in fact, raters of different ages (Hennessey, 1994), cultures (Hennessey, Kim, Zheng & Sun, 2008) and levels of expertise (Dollinger & Shafran, 2005) have been observed to agree about the relative creativity of products – findings which serve to greatly strengthen the legitimacy of our field of study. Although difficult to define, creativity really is something that we recognize when we see it.

Overall, I am less surprised than is Glăveanu about the current state of our field and also less disappointed in my colleagues (and myself). It is my experience that virtually every branch of the study of psychology is plagued by this same funneling of research questions, this same progressive narrowing of experimental focus. Certainly the work being done in the two other specialty areas with which I am most familiar, developmental and educational psychology, have both shown this tendency. I believe that there are multiple reasons for this trend. First, gone are the days when persons trained in philosophy or other areas of the humanities or social sciences have the occasion to publish in mainstream psychological journals. Those of us who do publish in those journals have been socialized to incorporate increasingly more complex experimental designs and data analysis procedures. The zeitgeist in the field of psychology, in my experience, is now driven by the expectation that our research will employ sophisticated structural equation modeling and other practices that were not even available a few decades ago. Simply stated, we have the technology and are expected to use it.

So what is a researcher, most especially a junior person hoping first to be hired at a top research university and later to be tenured, to do? If they are at all astute, they will game the system. Rather than spend time reading broadly within their field and may-

be even across fields, rather than philosophizing about the big ideas or writing book chapters suggesting new models or theories, they will devote their efforts to publishing as many empirical journal articles as possible. They will work at becoming skilled technicians, tweaking study designs that have worked for themselves or their colleagues in the past and focusing on minutia. They will employ highly sophisticated statistical approaches, ideally involving one or more moderator variables, even in situations where more basic analyses would be more appropriate. They will engage in a delicate balancing act between doing everything they can to assure that their study results will yield statistical significance while at the same time, being careful to add something new because they know that a pure replication of previous work will be viewed with disdain by their senior departmental colleagues or journal editors. And, perhaps above all else, they will strive to appear neither too qualitative nor too “applied”. In short, they will play it safe. And who can blame them? Yet as any student of creativity will attest, a scholar (or anyone) who is risk adverse has little hope of making theoretical or empirical breakthroughs.

But the tides may be changing. There is growing interest in reshaping the direction of contemporary research and theorizing, not only among persons focused on the study of creativity but among scholars representing the full range of the social science disciplines – psychological and educational arenas included. Collectively, this group is advocating for a re-examination of how empirical research is conducted and disseminated. This debate started not much more than a year ago with critiques of the long-accepted reliance on Null Hypothesis Statistical Testing (NHST) and p-value approaches (e.g., Cumming, 2014). More recently, the conversation expanded to include a call for the shoring up of psychological research with the replication of published empirical work (see *Social Psychology*, Volume 45, Number 3/ 2014). Importantly, creativity scholars have been vocal contributors to this dialogue. In August of this year, Makel and Plucker (2014) reported that only 13% of education articles published in the field’s top 100 journals are replications and argued convincingly for a turn-around of this trend; while Beghetto (2014) expanded upon recent critiques of the state of social science scholarship with a call to strengthen not only empirical techniques but also the theories that underpin original data-based studies and their replications. This movement to return to an emphasis on theory building, replication and the precise operationalization of variables is all the more exciting because Beghetto has recently taken over as editor of the *Journal of Creative Behavior*. In this new capacity of “gate keepers” for this influential publication so central to the field, Beghetto and his co-editors have the opportunity to effect significant positive change in creativity theorizing and research. Of course, not all journal editorial boards (or university reappointment and promotion committees) can be expected

to embrace radical modifications to the ways in which they do business. But it is exciting to see that creativity researchers are at the forefront of this movement.

The Journal of Creative Behavior has always distinguished itself with its commitment to publish a combination of applied and theoretical papers – both quantitative and qualitative. If reforms are truly to be made in the study of creativity, if researchers in this area are to be encouraged to expand their scholarly repertoire and step out of their comfort zone, it will be important for other creativity journals, most especially fledgling publications like CTRA, to follow suit. High quality scholarship of all forms, theoretical, experimental, applied, field-based, laboratory-based, quantitative, qualitative and prescriptive must be given equal consideration. Even the so-called tool box approaches with which Glăveanu finds fault must be included in this mix. Prescriptive work need be neither a-theoretical nor pseudo-scientific. Teachers, administrators, managers and others charged with the promotion of real-world creativity want and need such tools. They have neither the time nor the expertise necessary to extract empirically tested recommendations from the literature. And, in my mind, if the scholarship on creativity can't be construed to yield practical real-world recommendations, then it is of little value to anyone. My own hope for the future of the field is that as researchers are given license to expand their work to include a wide variety of experimental designs, methodologies, contexts and theoretical frameworks, they will never lose sight of the fact that their core mission must be to promote the growth of creativity at the individual, group, societal and multi-cultural levels.

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