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Creativity for Mental Health: Seeking New Answers to an Old Question

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is one of the potential outcomes of creative behavior deserving of further research, as much of previous anecdotal and scientific evidence has offered conflicting findings on this topic. Integrating the expertise and methods used by scholars in different disciplines (e.g., art therapy, clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, personality psychology) may help clarify the conditions under which creative behavior is or is not helpful for specific aspects of mental health, and generate new insights into the mechanisms that might explain such benefits.

Missing indentation ask a practitioner if creativity is beneficial or detrimental for mental health, and they will likely provide you with widely contradictory examples. A clinician might cite the example of a doctoral student so engrossed in brilliant scientific work that their mood cycled through extremes of excitement and despair. The same clinician may also have worked with an elderly individual who successfully used painting to cope with the loss of their spouse, or a college student who found that playing music did nothing to help them manage their anxiety. So which is it? Clearly (and to the disappointment of headline writers) the question is not whether engaging in creative behavior is helpful or harmful for mental health, but under which circumstances it is one versus the other.

The scientific literature suffers from the same contradictions that can be anecdotally observed in applied settings. Historiographic and epidemiological studies suggest that individuals in creative occupations have higher than average rates of mood disorders (e.g., Kyaga et al., 2011; Ludwig, 1995). Yet, other empirical research suggests that engaging in creative behaviors might benefit mood and psychological functioning (for a re-

view see Forgeard, Mecklenburg, Lacasse, & Jayawickreme, 2014). These apparent contradictions can be reconciled (e.g., picking a creative occupation might help cope with a mood vulnerability), but this is infrequently done because separate areas of scholarship examining relationships between creativity and mental health rarely speak directly to one another. Integrating the expertise and the methods offered by the fields of art therapy, clinical, cognitive, and personality psychology (among others) is needed to help advance our understanding of the conditions under which engaging in creative behavior is beneficial for mental health. What follows are a few promising directions to obtain new answers to this old question and shed further light on one potential important outcome of creative behavior.

The idea that engaging in certain creative activities can be helpful for mental health is not new - for example, art therapy researchers have already produced an important body of work to that effect (Slayton, D'Archer, & Kaplan, 2010). Yet, as Kaufman (2018) pointed out, most efforts dedicated to the study of creativity concern how to predict and enhance it, and not why or whether we might want to do this in the first place (Forgeard & Kaufman, 2016). Further scholarship investigating whether and how creative behavior leads to positive outcomes for mental health is needed to address this gap. In particular, one key question that needs to be addressed in order to broaden the relevance and impact of previous findings in this area (which have, for the most part, focused on the benefits of artistic activities) – is whether observed benefits of creative activities are, in fact, accounted for by their creative nature and not by more general therapeutic factors such as spending time with other people or engaging in a behaviorally activating task (Forgeard & Elstein, 2014).

Control groups are one way to address this problem. Another approach is to more precisely examine which relevant and specific cognitive, affective, and social processes occur during interventions, and whether these processes mediate any beneficial effects found. This might help answer a simple but fundamental question: do participants need to generate original and appropriate ideas or products (from either a subjective or objective standpoint) to benefit from creative activities, or is it enough to be afforded the opportunity to do so? A few experimental laboratory studies have examined this question (e.g., De Petrillo & Winner, 2011), but little to no research speaks to this issue in clinical samples and in naturalistic settings. Furthermore, if creativity is indeed the active ingredient explaining the benefits of specific interventions, why is this the case? Is the generation of original and appropriate ideas/products inherently rewarding (perhaps we enjoy surprising ourselves)? Or does it help build a sense of self-efficacy (we learn that we can accomplish something unexpected)? Or does it provide an opportunity for unconditional ac-

ceptance (we learn that we can put out unusual ideas in the world and not be judged or rejected)? Perhaps because the benefits of creative behavior seem intuitive, we have not yet fully clarified the mechanisms underlying positive effects, and this puts us at risk of also not understanding circumstances under which similar creative behavior may not be helpful or even harmful. For example, spending too much time on creative behavior, applying creative thinking strategies in inappropriate contexts, or having excessively high standards, could all lead to negative consequences that need to be better understood (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). By better understanding the conditions under which creative behavior benefits mental health, scientists will be in a better position to propose a wider range of applications going beyond the arts to cater to individuals with different inclinations and interests, as well as pique the interest of clinicians and scientists who may not (yet) grasp the relevance of creativity across domains of life.

In addition to obtaining a more fine-grained understanding of the processes that may explain the benefits of creativity, it will also be paramount to clearly delineate which aspects of mental health could be positively influenced. Recent research on adjustment to adverse events provides a useful example of the unique insights that can be drawn from examining a circumscribed aspect of mental health, as well as the value of integrating methods and insights from different areas of scholarship. Several studies in the field of art therapy suggest that creative expression may help individuals cope following highly challenging and stressful life experiences (Schouten, de Niet, Knipscheer, Kleber, & Hutschemaekers, 2015). How do these findings fit in with other research examining predictors of adjustment following adversity? Findings from personality psychology suggest that openness to experience, the personality trait most closely related to creative thinking and behavior, is associated with the ability to perceive and experience positive changes following extremely challenging events (a phenomenon referred to as “posttraumatic growth” or “stress-related growth,” among other terms) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Individuals high in openness to experience are able to fully consider and process external events and information, as well as internal experiences. Being attuned to a wide range of stimuli leads to an increased ability to come up with creative ideas. This same disposition is also associated with an increased susceptibility to the effects of stress, and an ability to personally grow from challenges (DeYoung, Grazioplene, & Peterson, 2012; for a review see DeYoung, 2015). And although research reviewed by Kaufman (2018) suggests that the trait of openness to experience does not tend to change much, recent research capturing relevant personality states and behaviors dynamically and frequently over time has shown that temporary manifestations of openness and creativity are associated with increased well-being (e.g., Conner, DeYoung, & Silvia, 2018; Forgeard et al., in press).

In sum, one of the many ways in which scholars can help increase understanding of the potential beneficial outcomes of creative thinking and behavior is to further elucidate the conditions under which they lead (or do not lead) to enhanced mental health. Although this topic is not new, the fragmentation of relevant research within scientific silos has impeded progress in this area. Kaufman's (2018) timely call for further research on the outcomes of creativity will hopefully stimulate enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary research to yield novel insights that can ultimately be applied to maximize the potential benefits of creative behavior for mental health and wellness.

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