

Are the Outcomes of Creativity Always Positive?

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ABSTRACT

The paper by Kaufman (2018) calls for more research on the consequences of creativity. While we typically think about the positive consequences of creativity, it is important to understand that creativity can have negative, both intended and unintended consequences. In this commentary, I review the nascent literature on negative and malevolent creativity, and specifically discuss concerns regarding measurement. Having a consistent way to evaluate and measure negative creativity is critical to our understanding and future research.

Kaufman (2018) calls for a reexamination of our understanding of creativity and consequences of creativity. He notes that research on the effects of creativity, creativity as a predictor, instead of a criterion, is lacking. Further, our typical understanding of creativity is through a positive lens. That is, we have a tendency to believe that the effects of creativity are positive, leading to better individual outcomes and business success (Cropley, Kaufman, White, & Chiera, 2014). However, recent research into the negative consequences of creativity suggests that creativity does not always result in positive outcomes (Clark & James, 1999; Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015; Cropley & Cropley 2011; Ligon, Sporer, & Derrick, 2017). Creative ideas may intentionally or unintentionally cause harm (Cropley, Kaufman, & Cropley, 2008).

While the notion that the effects of creativity are not always positive is not new, research aiming to understand the factors that lead to negative or malevolent creativity and the consequences of these has lagged. However, interest in this topic has increased in the last decade, resulting in an increase in research and understanding of negative and

malevolent creativity. Research suggests that creative people may be more likely to engage in dishonest behavior such as lying or cheating (Beaussart, Andrews, & Kaufman, 201; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Kapoor, 2015). Further, those higher in malevolent or negative creativity have been found to be more aggressive (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015; Lee & Dow, 2011), higher in psychopathy (Kapoor, 2015; Kapoor & Khan, 2016), lower in emotional intelligence (Harris, Reiter-Palmon, & Kaufman, 2013), and lower in conscientiousness (Kapoor & Khan, in press). In addition, situational variables have also been found to influence negative and malevolent creativity. Specifically, individuals are more willing to come up with negatively creative ideas when they are prompted to do so or in response to a negative or unjust situation (Clark & James, 1999; Gutworth, Cushenbery, & Hunter, 2016; Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015; Kapoor & Khan, in press).

While research on this topic is emerging, measurement of negative or malevolent creativity still remains difficult. One of the concerns of measuring malevolent creativity in real life (i.e., crime, terrorism, counter productive work behaviors) is that there is a low base-rate. That is, these types of negative behaviors occur relatively infrequently (Harris et al., 2013). Moreover, when they do occur, for the most part they are not novel. Therefore truly creative, that is original, negative acts are rare. This low base-rate makes it much more difficult to study the antecedents of these acts. This low base-rate is also found in the laboratory, potentially because individuals are reluctant to disclose negative or malevolent ideas, even if they can think of them. In fact, in our own research we have found that under normal conditions we see relatively few negatively creative ideas, and we had to create conditions such as asking people for ideas for revenge in order to find a larger number of negative and original ideas (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015).

Another issue that we have identified is that negative creativity is not measured in a uniform way. Early work, such as that by Clark and James (1999) evaluated the creativity of ideas, and negative creativity was determined to include those ideas that were generated in response to a scenario depicting an unjust situation. Lee and Dow (2011) evaluated negative creativity using traditional divergent thinking measures such as uses for a brick. Negative creativity was determined by the number of ideas that were harmful in response to the divergent thinking (DT) stimulus, regardless of how original or common the idea was. Harris et al. (2013) noted that these two approaches focus on only one aspect of negative creativity: either originality or harmfulness. However, both are necessary for an idea or solution to be negatively creativity. Harris and his colleagues (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015; Harris et al., 2013) suggested an alternative, in which ideas are evaluated independently for valence (negative/harm) and originality. Only those ideas

that are high on both are counted as malevolent or negatively creative ideas. Kapoor and Khan (2016) asked participants to read a number of scenarios and choose the most likely course of action, with one course of action being positive-creative, another neutral, and one negatively-creative. The scores on the negative-creativity score were correlated with positive creativity from the same measure. Interestingly, the negative-creativity scores from the scenarios were inconsistently correlated with responses to three DT measures scored for both positive creativity and negative creativity.

Two scales have been developed to assess the tendency to engage in negative creativity and focus on more behavioral items. Hao, Tang, Yang, Wang, and Runco (2016) developed a self-report scale which has 13 items and 3 factors: hurting people, lying, and playing tricks. Hao et al. argued that this behavioral approach is needed to address the issue that individuals will not suggest negative ideas in response to a DT task due to social desirability. While the scale shows good reliability and is related to other measures of creativity, many of the items do not focus on negative or malevolent creativity. Only 3 of the 13 items specifically focus on new or novel ways of causing harm or using unconventional methods. The other items specifically ask about causing harm in different ways for different reasons, but with no reference to the novelty of the behavior. Therefore, this scale is not truly a measure of malevolent creativity, rather of negative behaviors. Kapoor (2015) used a forced choice format in which participants select one of three options in response to a situation that is presented to them: positive-creative, neutral, or negative creative.

As noted, the measurement of creativity in general (Reiter-Palmon & Schoenbeck, in press), and of malevolent creativity in particular (Kapoor & Khan, 2016) is difficult and inconsistent. One of the important findings from the creativity research is that the measurement of creativity can have important implications for the results found in studies (Hornberg & Reiter-Palmon, 2017; Reiter-Palmon, Illies Young, Kobe, Buboltz, & Nimps, 2009). Inconsistent results across studies may stem from inconsistent measurement. Therefore, while studying negative and malevolent creativity is in its infancy, it is important that we attend carefully to the issue of measurement.

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