

“Generic” Creativity as a Predictor or Outcome of Identity Development?

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ABSTRACT

In this brief commentary to Kaufman’s call for a “new agenda for positive outcomes” of creativity research, I emphasize how the broad construct of “identity” qualifies as such an outcome. While doing so, I challenge the issue of directionality (predictor vs. outcome) of creativity in relation to relevant correlates by outlining the influence of epistemological position and publication bias in directional interpretations of correlational findings. Through illustrations of various levels of relationships between creativity and identity, I also urge creativity researchers to be more explicit regarding how “generic” creativity is being operationalized in their study, so that more targeted hypotheses regarding the relationship between distinct aspects of creativity and such positive outcome variables may be formulated.

In creativity literature, it is apparent that many studies are justified with the argument that creativity is a good skill (e.g., “21st century skill”) that must be encouraged and potential fulfilled (e.g., Runco, 2016) as if the ultimate outcome of creativity research was such. Correspondingly, it is not so surprising that much of creativity research efforts are geared towards finding factors that somehow “boost” creativity (e.g., Amabile, 1996), and generally operationalize creativity as an outcome variable (Forgeard & Kaufman, 2016). Despite certainly good reasons to do so, there may be a bigger picture than improving creativity for creativity’s sake only, as duly suggested by Kaufman (2018). Building upon Kaufman’s call to “set a new agenda for positive outcomes” of creativity research, I introduce the broad construct “identity” as a critical candidate for this new agenda. A focus on this construct is also a good way to add on Kaufman’s initial thoughts and extend the discussion relative to (1) the question of directionality of effects and status of creativity variables

as dependent (DV) or independent (IV), and (2) the nature of operationalization of both the creativity phenomenon and the outcome of interest (here, identity).

Identity, Creativity, and the Chicken-and-Egg Problem

The field of creativity research is rather immune to questions relative to how creativity can support psychosocial development in general, and identity development specifically (Barbot, in press; Sica, Ragozini, Di Palma, & Aleni Sestito, in press). Although there is a (re)emerging line of work relative to "creative identity" (e.g., Karwowski et al., 2013; Petkus, 1996; Rostan, 1998) and the relationship between creativity and social identity (Glăveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Haslam, Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, & Jans, 2013) or multiple identities (Gocłowska & Crisp, 2014; Steffens et al., 2016), these contributions are usually not concerned with how creativity (viewed as an independent variable) may support identity *per se*; an endeavor that has tremendous practical implications (Barbot, in press; Barbot & Heuser, 2017). Reciprocally, the field of identity has paid very little attention to creativity (Dollinger, Clancy Dollinger, & Centeno, 2005; Dollinger & Dollinger, 2017), although one could expect it to be more prolific than the field of creativity in that respect.

Indeed, considering creativity as a predictor rather than an outcome of identity certainly reflects distinct epistemological positions. There are, of course, theoretical reasons to justify one or the other causal directions (for review, see Barbot, 2008; Dollinger et al., 2005; Dollinger & Dollinger, 2017). For example, humanistic psychologists have viewed creativity as a natural fulfillment of the self, or self-actualization (Maslow, 1958; Rogers, 1954). Accordingly, identity is conceptualized as an outcome variable and creativity as an independent variable on which people have agency (e.g., Tinio & Barbot, 2017). While this view should exceed the threshold for "positive outcomes" called by Kaufman (2018), it still doesn't provide the whole picture - which may be true for any such outcome - that is, a most likely reciprocal, dynamic and intertwined relationship between those constructs¹.

In current days, these distinct epistemological positions may come with a pinch of publication biases. For instance, looking at the relationships between creativity and identity using regression analysis and cross-sectional design can lead to distinct "storylines" in reporting findings, according to whether creativity or identity are treated as DV or IV. Most creativity and identity journals would certainly be eager to publish such studies either way, but showing that identity reasonably "predicts"² creativity would likely catch more attention from the creativity research community, whereas the reciprocal (and statistically equivalent) "story" will best fit the identity readership. In short, the operationalization of

¹ Some approaches, however, have outlined reciprocal or interactive developmental relationships between identity and creativity (Albert, 1990), such as differential "causal weights" according to which the causality between creativity and identity development varies at different stages of a person's life (Barbot, 2008).

² More accurately, "accounts for".

creativity as IV or DV doesn't (statistically) matter because such cross-sectional, correlational designs cannot possibly illuminate causality, and the reporting of results (tailored to a given audience/outlet) may in some cases be misleading. With this in mind, it is not too surprising that 3/4 of creativity papers use creativity as a DV (Forgeard & Kaufman, 2016; Kaufman, 2018).

Creativity and Identity: Which and What?

Positing that creativity supports identity (e.g., Helson & Pals, 2000) should also come with some granularity given the multidimensionality of both the constructs of identity and creativity (Barbot & Heuser, 2017; Barbot & Lubart, 2012). A recurrent problem in creativity research is the reference to "generic" creativity for different operationalizations of the creativity phenomenon (Barbot & Tinio, 2015). We cannot expect other fields (e.g., identity) to do better on that account. When looking at creativity as a predictor of some positive outcomes, it is likely that we can predict different things according to whether we refer to creative thinking, creative personality, potential, talent, participation, achievements or other relevant aspects of creativity. For the sake of illustration, I will outline three aspects of creativity (thinking processes, participation, expression) that are theoretically and/or empirically related to distinct aspects of identity (Barbot & Heuser, 2017; Barbot & Lubart, 2012).

First, there are conceptual and empirical overlaps between the key *thinking processes* of both creativity and identity. Probably the best illustration is divergent thinking (DT). DT is not exclusively involved in creative thinking but in any domain of experience in which people have to solve open-ended problems (Barbot, Lubart, & Besançon, 2016). Identity formation can be viewed as such a domain (e.g., Berman, 1998). Correspondingly, DT has been moderately related to the process of identity exploration (e.g., consideration of alternative commitments in important domains of life; Marcia, 1966) with a range of DT tasks (Barbot, 2008; Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001; Sica et al., in press). Other relevant thinking processes commonly associated with creativity such as convergent-integrative thinking (e.g., Barbot, Besançon, & Lubart, 2015; Cropley, 2006) may be relevant to identity processes (e.g., synthesizing or integrating, at time disparate, representations of self in a unique and coherent way).

Second, *participation in creative activities* represents another layer of the creativity-identity relationship. In fact, strong commitments to any kind of activities (whether creative or not) provide people with attributes for self-definition (e.g., "I am a painter", "I am a musician"). People naturally attempt to protect their self by engaging in activities that are sources of rewards, and disengage those that are sources of disappointment (e.g., Beghetto, 2014). In turn, creative participation becomes not only a source of self-

definition (Barbot & Heuser, 2017), but also a potential source of self-efficacy and positive self-esteem (Jausi, Randel, & Dionne, 2007) that could carry over in other domains of experience. Finally, some creative (expressive) activities may be used as *outlets for "adaptive" self-expression* of identity-related concerns (e.g., Hunt, 1998), and there are certainly other hypotheses that can be formulated regarding other aspects of both creativity and identity.

CONCLUSION

Given the various levels of creativity-identity relationships illustrated above, one can wonder whether stimulating one (e.g., creativity) can truly impact the other (e.g., identity). The answers to this question clearly deserve more empirical support and I hope that the brief overview presented here will steer the new agenda of research towards this line of work. For this agenda to be successful (and regardless of the "positive outcome" of interest), I have also suggested two "add-ons" to Kaufman's call. First, while it is certainly important to see creativity as a predictor of some positive outcome, things should not be one-sided; The reciprocal, dynamic, sometimes intertwined nature of the relationships between creativity and those outcomes should be accounted for or at least acknowledged (regardless of epistemological position and/or publication bias). The ultimate point of this is not just to address issues of directionality or operationalization of variables (IV vs. DV), but also an issue of actionability of research findings. Second, being specific on which aspect of "creativity" is considered (e.g., potential, participation, expression) in relation to those positive outcomes will help make clearer, more targeted hypotheses on the outcome of interest. Together, these should increase the chances of success of the new agenda and make creativity a less elusive phenomenon in both the expert's and the novice's eye.

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