

Theory and Context / Theory in Context: Towards an Expanded View of the Creativity Field*

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ABSTRACT

It is debatable whether the psychology of creativity is a field in crisis or not. There are clear signs of increased fragmentation and a scarcity of integrative efforts, but is this necessarily bad? Do we need more comprehensive theories of creativity and a return to old epistemological questions? This depends on how one understands theory. Against a view of theoretical work as aiming towards generality, universality, uniformity, completeness, and singularity, I advocate for a dynamic perspective in which theory is plural, multifaceted, and contextual. Far from 'waiting for the Messiah', theoretical work in the psychology of creativity can be integrative without having the ambition to explain or, even more, predict, creative expression across all people, at all times, and in all domains. To avoid such ambition, the psychology of creativity requires a theory of context that doesn't arbitrarily separate person and environment or simply postulate the existence of 'levels' of context without questioning the relations between them. In order to understand these levels and their inter-relations we need however to consider insights from a variety of disciplines outside psychology, in a truly transdisciplinary manner. Consideration needs to be given as well to connected scholarship focusing on imagination, innovation, and improvisation. Last but not least, an expanded theory of context cannot ignore the institutional context of doing research on creativity. Creativity scholars are facing considerable constraints when it comes to advancing theory beyond disciplinary limits, but this makes such efforts all the more worthwhile.

It is a great privilege to have such a large number of colleagues offer comments on my 'critical reading' of the field published in the previous issue of this journal (Glăveanu, 2014a). Their thoughtful remarks and suggestions have certainly enriched my thinking and made me reflect further on my own ideas as well as their (intended or unintended)

consequences. I found myself in agreement with most of the views expressed and found also particularly useful those views that differ radically from my own. More debate is precisely what I advocated for in the lead article and this fruitful exchange of ideas is a great illustration of such an exercise; therefore, I am very happy to see the call of the target article answered and, once more, would like to thank the editors for making this exchange possible. Considering the large number of comments received, I will focus in this short reply on only half of them, mainly those that explicitly referred to the role of theory in the psychology of creativity. This is an essential topic for me and, although I am not able to discuss it at length here, I take this opportunity to add some, hopefully useful, clarifications.

The starting point for my reply is the deliberately controversial claim that the psychology of creativity is a field in *crisis*. For me the signs of this crisis are represented by a) increased fragmentation into more and more specialised fields, b) a lack of sustained dialogue between them and a scarcity of integrative efforts, and c) losing sight of key theoretical questions related to epistemology, methodology, and disciplinary practices. While these observations themselves were not essentially contradicted by any of the commentators, the conclusion that they signal a crisis or that this crisis has serious negative consequences was received differently. While some agreed with my assessment enthusiastically (Montuori, 2014), others 'stopped short' of claiming there is a crisis (Cropley, 2014) or thought that, according to the criteria mentioned, many areas of psychology if not the whole discipline can be said to be experiencing a crisis (Chruszczewski, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi & Lebudá, 2014). Interestingly, for others there is a crisis but precisely for the opposite reasons: too many general models and not enough 'fragmentation' (Baer, 2014). But the most common alternative view was that, in fact, the crisis might not be a problem but an opportunity, a natural state of affairs in the development of a relatively young field (Beghetto, 2014; Cropley, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi & Lebudá, 2014). At the other extreme, the crisis itself became the very sign of progress and something that should be celebrated rather than lamented (Silvia, 2014).

It is not the acceptance or rejection of the idea of crisis that concerns me. In fact, as I anticipated, "several of what I consider limitations might be taken as signs of progress by others" (Glăveanu, 2014a, p. 27). What interests me here are the different interpretations behind considering the current state of affairs harmful or productive. And, when focusing on this issue, a rather salient dichotomy seems to emerge between the 'One Theory' and the 'messiness' the empirical world or, in the inspired words of Chruszczewski (2014), between waiting for the Messiah and having progress gradually arise out of a bubbling, 'primordial broth'.

CONTEXTUALISING THEORY

As a cultural psychologist I have always been concerned with the construction of theory and this concern clearly transpires through my critique of mainstream research within the psychology of creativity. The fact that I am a great admirer of integrative theoretical proposals is obvious from the lead article and most of my other work in the area of creativity. It is not my aim, however, to impose my own preference on others but reflect on its strengths and limitations. Therefore, in the commentaries received, I paid particular attention to criticism since it gave me the chance to better understand, define and refine my own position.

First, let me re-state some of my claims:

“Scholars seem to have abandoned the *‘big’ questions* in favour of increasingly specialised inquiries leading them to develop subfields of a subfield (adding small bricks to an existing edifice) rather than contributing to our overall understanding of creativity (consider the edifice itself)” (Glăveanu, 2014a, p. 12).

“(…) the trouble is that researchers (…) are often not aware of their meta-theoretical choices and their important consequences. In this sense, besides the questions actually formulated in various studies, most of the assumptions underpinning the research remain unfortunately *unquestioned*” (Glăveanu, 2014a, p. 14)

“(…) we need to acknowledge the *importance* of ‘grand theories’ for organising and guiding our research (…) findings and middle-level models cannot float around, unsupported, they need to be ‘located’ somewhere within a conception of what creativity is *in relation* to what being a person is, or what it means to live within a society and culture. (…) it is a matter of knowing these theories and making the effort to understand and work with or against them” (Glăveanu, 2014a, p. 22-23).

It is to be noted that, despite my own preference for high-level theorising, the statements above *do not* invite colleagues to elaborate more and more grandiose theories of creativity. What they call for is awareness of the bigger picture. In other words, a critical reflection on theoretical and epistemological issues and being sensitive to the broader theoretical basis we build on and contribute to with our empirical work. I was therefore surprised to find, in some of the commentaries, a certain depiction of what focusing on theory is or can be that doesn’t correspond to what I am advocating for. More than this, some of these comments suggest an image of theory characterised by universalism, generality, uniformity, singularity, completeness, and exclusivity. Ultimately, a view of theory that is absolute and a-contextual. My own, essentially pragmatist approach to theory, is very far from, if not the exact opposite of this; as such, I take this chance to add a few clarifica-

tions regarding the kinds of theoretical work I had in mind when writing the lead article.

1. *Theory should not be universal but contextual.* The suspicion that meta-theoretical narratives want to explain everything and end up explaining nothing is well warranted. However, this is not the kind of theory I envision for the field of creativity and the sociocultural frameworks I have tried to build in the past testify to this. Cultural psychology itself, which is my own theoretical orientation, emerged as a reaction to universalistic claims within general psychology (focused primarily on physiological processes) and, later, cross-cultural psychology (with its standardised view of culture; for details see Shweder, 1990; Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 2007). In this sense, my own position is closer to that of Baer than his comment might reflect (see Baer, 2014). I too share the same belief that any theory of creativity, independent of its level of theorising, must start from context. Domains are one of the key ways in which context is integrated into our thinking about creativity, although not the only one. A clear example that a theory can be ‘general’ (in terms of level) and yet contextual (in scope) is precisely the Amusement Park Model (Baer & Kaufman, 2005)! The apparent disagreement originates in the fact that Baer and I use the term ‘fragmentation’ in different ways: he points to domain-specificity while I refer to the fact that subfields don’t communicate well with each other.

2. *Theory is not singular but plural.* Related to the above is the (mis)conception that the best theory is all-encompassing and, therefore, singular. Having different, even opposing theories, for different facets of creativity is bad according to this logic. Such a view however is not only unrealistic but harmful and I full-heartedly join Silvia (2014) in celebrating pluralism, in both theory and research, over singularity. I am not sure where the idea that having people interested in creativity “in so many different fields of scholarship” is lamented (Silvia, 2014, p.235), but in any case I would like to dispel this critique. Theoretical pluralism is undoubtedly “a sign of intellectual dynamism” (p. 235). Now, Silvia and I do seem to disagree, however, on how useful it is for these efforts to develop and continue to exist largely separately, with only surface-level dialogue between different communities.

3. *Theorising takes place at many levels.* Chruszczewski (2014) metaphorically referred to waiting for the Messiah in creativity studies whenever we hope for the ‘big’ theory to emerge. For him, and not only, a special place needs to be reserved for “spontaneous, parallel and bottom-up reorganizations” (Chruszczewski, 2014, p. 243), in other words, for middle-range theorising (Karwowski, 2014). I completely agree with this! When I argued for going back to the ‘big’ questions I did not mean they require ‘big’ theories to answer them. In line with Montuori (2014), my plea is to question the epistemologi-

cal foundation and practical applications of theory — ‘big’, ‘middle’ or ‘small’. Silvia’s example that “we should use a sociocultural theory to understand how creative domains evolve, but use cognitive theories to understand how knowledge constrains idea production” (Silvia, 2014, p. 235) fails, from this perspective, to properly reflect on differences in epistemology...

4. *Theory doesn’t need to be predictive.* Chruszczewski (2014, p. 243) notes that, “the day when we reach a good theory of creativity par excellence, will be the day on which we learn what *specific conditions* are required to create a philosophical treatise, lead a political group to victory or write a drama. In my opinion such a day will never come”. I would add to this that we shouldn’t also look forward to such a day. A ‘good’ theory par excellence is not, in my view, one that explains creativity away, one that postulates and predicts all outcomes at all times. Theory can describe and organise (frameworks) as well as explain and even locally predict (models) and so its value should not be judged in terms of prediction alone.

5. *Theory is not optional.* Studies that aim to develop theory in the psychology of creativity are relatively rare, especially as regards high-level theorising. And this is perhaps a natural state of affairs as Simonton (2014) writes — what would we do if everyone started creating new theories and new vocabularies that go with them? We are, I would say, safe from that. It is much more common for research to contribute to a certain line of theory, test a model on a new population, add a factor to an existing list, etc. There is no a-theoretical research simply because, from the very choice of our method or sample to how we interpret findings, we necessarily contribute to a certain line of scholarship, to a certain paradigmatic view of creativity. My argument has been that we need, first and foremost, to be aware of this. For this reason it is all the more surprising to read Silvia’s (2014) call for more ‘method-driven research’. When I mentioned this in the lead article, I referred to the way in which well-established methods can be used uncritically, simply because they are just ‘there’, available and legitimate. Silvia (2014), on the other hand, argues for trying new methods and, through this, potentially extending or complexifying our understanding of creativity. This might very well be an interesting exercise. But trying ‘new methods on for size’ without taking into account their theoretical basis can only be, I argue, less fruitful than expected. My reading of his suggestions highlights, in fact, precisely this: new methods are exciting precisely because they introduce us to new theoretical or conceptual landscapes. There is no purely method-driven research simply because one cannot separate theory from method; neither of them is optional.

In summary, the (re)turn to theory I advocate for is not one towards a singular, general,

universal and final theoretical construction. It is not a call for uniformity or for a situation in which a small number of gatekeepers would control academic output based on the tenets of one grand theory (Cropley, 2014; Silvia, 2014). In the lead article I even postulated the fact that some of the most interesting work (including theoretically) comes from the 'periphery' rather than the 'centre'. What I didn't make explicit there, and I take this opportunity to clarify, is that I understand theory-building as a dynamic, iterative process (see for example Valsiner's, 2014, methodological cycle). Theory is not only the 'endpoint' on the 'arduous path of cumulative science' (Benedek & Jauk, 2014) and very often we are not even close to reaching an integrative framework (see the case of creative cognition; Reiter-Palmon, 2014). Theories are not in fact 'points', final and static entities, but the mark of 'transitions'; they are not meant to make reality uniform and flatten its asperities, on the contrary, they help us observe it through ever-changing lenses. This is why the key for me doesn't reside exclusively in constructing theory (bucket building for Beghetto, 2014) but *relating theories and conceptions to each other*, putting them in dialogue (see also Kaufman, 2014).

I personally do not subscribe to the view of doing science put forward by Benedek and Jauk (2014, p. 213-219), despite it probably being the most common in psychology and beyond. For them, the study of a highly complex phenomenon like creativity necessarily starts with simplification, reduction to simple, tractable problems. This leads to the accumulation of dependable knowledge, replicable effects, and integrating existing evidence into available models; progressing, in time, from simple to increasingly complex models. The two authors argue for recognising the value of this process and the fact that it cannot be side-stepped by immediately jumping to new, grand theories. I do not disagree with this last remark. But the mainly inductive process outlined above ignores the role of theoretical assumptions underlying even the most simple (if not precisely the most simple!) segmentations that allow empirical research. As I have argued above, research doesn't end with theory: it starts from it and is guided by it throughout. The analytical approach Benedek and Jauk mention belongs to a certain, largely positivist, legacy of doing research which is one option among many. Historically, holistic thinking dominated psychology (see Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2008) and I advocate for starting from wholes, as complex as they might be, and proceeding analytically to study them in a non-reductive manner (not reducing wholes to their parts; for example reducing creativity to the creative person, the creative person to cognitive processes, and cognitive processes to divergent thinking). Of course, deciding what the whole is, in the case of creativity, and what the parts are, is itself a crucial theoretical question (for a discussion of this issue, see

Glăveanu, 2015b). And this theoretical question brings us back to the central notion of context and its implications for theory and research.

TOWARDS AN EXPANDING THEORY OF CONTEXT

The psychology of creativity needs a theory of context, something that has concerned me for a number of years. This concern stems from the holistic approach adopted by cultural psychology in dealing with the study of phenomena in context. Moving away from 'flat', uni-dimensional models that privilege the intra-psychological alone (e.g., cognitive operations, personality traits, etc.) we should strive towards 3-D models that incorporate sociality, materiality, and temporality into our thinking about creativity (Glăveanu, 2014c,d). The problem is that these aspects, particularly the social and material, are assigned by many to context rather than the phenomenon of interest itself and context is usually given a secondary role. Context surrounds instead of being that which 'makes things grow' (Cole, 1996). Context is external rather than an integral part of what we are studying. This theoretical perspective makes it legitimate to separate phenomenon from context, even while admitting that context 'shapes' the phenomenon. Take the example of person and social environment in the psychology of creativity. Very few researchers would claim the latter is not important but, since it is part of the context, it can be set aside in order to zoom in on the person and his/her bio-psychological makeup. This is not possible within the paradigm of cultural psychology which considers mind and context as co-constitutive and inter-dependent (Shweder, 1990).

I have repeatedly claimed above that there is no, nor should there ever be, one grand theory of creativity. The integrative theoretical efforts I argued for are not meant to take us to this, but rather to conceptual and methodological exchanges and to frameworks that are able to articulate multiple levels or (compare and contrast) multiple domains. In other words, lead us to systemic theories. Systemic models are not absent in the psychology of creativity (see Csikszentmihalyi & Lebudá, 2014) but truly *systemic thinking* is rare. Commonly, systems are represented as additive structures that start from the biological (the brain), move to the psychological (intelligence, personality, motivation, etc.), and add to them several social layers (inter-personal, group and intergroup), up to the most far-reaching levels of society and culture. This is considered a sufficient theoretical move to bring in 'the big picture' and continue doing research at one level while only postulating its relation to the others (my accusation towards the neuropsychology of creativity). But what is the nature of these relations? Simply arguing that each 'layer' of the system is qualitatively different doesn't answer the big question of how one can relate or integrate findings.

This is further complicated by the fact that the different 'levels' or 'layers' of a systemic model are studied from different epistemological positions and integration is never achieved by simply putting things together, akin to a shopping list. Different disciplines might very well hold different pieces of the creativity 'puzzle' and, as such, context becomes much broader than what psychology envisions. In moving towards systemic thinking we need to take into account findings and assumptions from a variety of fields (see also the proposal of creatology; Magyari-Beck, 1999). Does this mean we have, from now on, to know and do everything if we are to succeed in becoming "big-picture polymaths" (Silvia, 2014, p. 235)? Certainly not. My critique of fragmentation is not one of the academic division of labour (although I am indeed critical of sharp disciplinary boundaries). This is not a call for psychologists to become, in turn, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, neurobiologists, and so on. The alternative mentioned by Silvia, that of eliminating "some of the occupations and focus everyone's effort on the most promising path" (Silvia, 2014, p. 236), what he humorously compares to Mao's Great Leap Forward, can only be equally disastrous. What Silvia doesn't take into account however as a potential answer is *transdisciplinarity*.

Montuori (2014, also Montuori, 2008, 2013) has made important contributions in this regard, particularly in relation to creativity, creative inquiry, and complexity theory. His reference to the thinking of Bateson, Morin and Barron is highly relevant for any efforts aimed at expanding the context of psychological approaches to creativity. Intra-disciplinary research rarely questions its own assumptions because it is not faced with any form of radical 'otherness', for as diverse as any one discipline might be (and the psychology of creativity is a complex field, informed by cognitive, personality, social, and developmental scholarship, among others). Inter-disciplinary collaborations represent a step forward but they often leave things at the level of acknowledging another perspective and, in many cases, do not really challenge the established consensus (for example, today's dialogue between cognitive and neuroscience approaches to creativity). In contrast, transdisciplinary work "involves an awareness and questioning of multiple sets of paradigmatic assumptions, including one's own, and requires the integration of the inquirer into the inquiry" (Montuori, 2014, p. 250). Transdisciplinarity doesn't ask us to know everything about everything and it also doesn't result in uniformity; it fundamentally involves meta-paradigmatic exchanges and the contextualisation of (disciplinary) research efforts. Moreover, it fundamentally relates knowledge construction to action in the world, something that resonates deeply with pragmatist accounts of science (James, 1907) to which I thoroughly subscribe. This appeal to look beyond psychology in order to under-

stand creativity in a broader context resonates with other commentators, notably Kaufman (2015; also Reiter-Palmon, Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014), who argues for the need to become 'multilingual'. Different commentaries to the lead article also bring in various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, from engineering (Cropley, 2014) to marketing and management (Shiu, 2014).

An expanded theory of context in the psychology of creativity not only builds on systemic and transdisciplinary thinking but necessarily has to engage with related notions such as imagination and innovation. Beghetto (2014) offers an insightful sketch of an integrative imagination, creativity, and innovation (ICI) model, drawing on the notion of mediation. His focus rightfully is not on these concepts themselves but the "reciprocal, bi-directional, mediated, and moderated relationships" (Beghetto, 2014, p. 209) between them. His framework is integrative while at the same time being flexible, not prescriptive, proof of the dynamic nature of theory building I mentioned before. His proposed alternation between zooming in and out as well as the coordination between 'bucket building' and 'bucket filling' are useful for redefining the relation between general and particular / local in creativity theory. What I would add to the list is the concept of *improvisation*, thus suggesting a tetradic rather than triadic framework (much as triangular depictions are preferred in models of mediation). This tetrad is not accidental. It actually resonates, without a perfect one-to-one matching, with several other typologies based on discipline (education and creativity, business and innovation, the arts/sciences and imagination, everyday life and improvisation), on creativity 'units' (person/imagination, process/improvisation, product/creativity, press/innovation), on creativity level (mini-c and imagination, little c and improvisation, Pro C and creativity, Big C and innovation), and stages of creative work (from imagination to creative ideas, then an improvisational process of making and finally implementing the outcomes as innovations). Of course none of the above captures everything imagination, creativity, improvisation and innovation can be or have been studied as. This is why cross-fertilisation between these different literatures is vital for each. Each one of them can highlight certain facets of the creative process and, most of all, can help us connect them. For example, imagination brings the symbolic to the fore and the processes of distancing that make as-if thinking possible; improvisation highlights the temporal in the unfolding exchanges between person and environment; finally, innovation focuses on the social sphere and the institutionalisation of creativity. Each of these facets appears thus, in turn, as central figure or context, depending on the questions we ask.

THEORY IN (INSTITUTIONAL) CONTEXT

This reflection brings me to the last aspect of context I would like to mention. It is not only the case, as I have argued above, that we need a theory of context in the psychology of creativity (by which I don't mean one singular theory; see the first section), but that, in building it, we are constrained by the academic context of our own activity. Theoretical work might be appreciated by some but it is also regarded with scepticism and even suspicion; some of the commentaries in this issue illustrate this attitude. In today's landscape of doing Kuhnian, 'normal science' (Benedek & Jauk, 2014), theorising is something to be kept for last and empirical work becomes a priority. This is inscribed also in the implicit hierarchy of many journals, not only in creativity, but more broadly in psychology. Research reports are called for more than theory papers and, among the former, quantitative research is much more common than qualitative research. Moreover, there is little space, at least in specialised journals, for publishing transdisciplinary work. All of these institutional constraints need to be taken into account when discussing what is / might be a crisis in our field. Many commentators made reference to similar restrictions and their larger, socio-political basis. Montuori (2014) said that academia today is not a place for nomadism or recovering old scholarship (the more or less explicit rule of citing from the last five years...). Plucker (2014) referred to the implicit requirement of using certain methodologies, like hierarchical linear modelling in education. Simonton (2014) complained about the general 'publish or perish' policy that favours quantity over quality. All of these make it less likely to formulate, express and pursue novel or 'revolutionary' theoretical ideas (Chruszczewski, 2014).

In this context one has to wonder if the set of general 'guidelines' I proposed at the end of the lead article can actually work or would make it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve academic recognition in the area of creativity research. These guidelines themselves have been received differently. Cropley (2014) analysed their utility, point by point; Simonton (2014) used them as a checklist for self-reflection. For Plucker (2014, p. 230), however, they were "the least provocative part of the paper" while Csikszentmihalyi and Lebeda (2014, p. 194) saw them as "bland and bureaucratic". This might well be the case. Future readers are advised that this list, as I mentioned in the lead paper, is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. In retrospect, I should have added perhaps a final piece of advice, in the spirit of Orwell's (2006) politics for the English language: 'break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous'.

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