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Is the Psychology of Creativity in Terminal Crisis? Comments on Glăveanu's Article 'The Psychology of Creativity: A Critical Reading'*

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ABSTRACT

The comment is organized around two questions, which were raised after reading the article: The Psychology of Creativity: A Critical Reading. Is there indeed a crisis, which may be threatening the psychology of creativity and if there is one, does the solution lie along the lines of developing an "increased awareness and responsibility" in relation to the future of the discipline. The discussion of these two questions is based on the systems conception of creativity.

More or less systematic reflections on the condition of the psychology of creativity have been taking place for years (Chan, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Mayer, 1999; Mumford, 2003; Sawyer, 2012). Perhaps this "concern" results from the constantly self-critical stance of research in general, or is a typical feature of a "young" sub-discipline requiring support in its development, and intent on constructively overcoming emergent problems (or crises).

We applaud Professor Glaveanu's attempt to overcome what he characterizes as a "pervasive and difficult" crisis in the domain of creativity research. However, we are not at all sure that a) there is indeed a crisis which may be threatening the domain, b) if there is one, that the solution lies along the lines of developing an "increased awareness and responsibility" in relation to the future of the discipline. Let us discuss these two points.

The author presents the following reasons as evidence that a crisis exists: Creativity researchers tend not to reveal their "paradigmatic assumptions" (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 13); their questions are "method-driven" (ibid.); underpinning assumptions remain unques-

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tioned (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 14); they tend to fragment the phenomenon studied by being too analytic (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 19); by relying too much on psychometrics, by decontextualizing the creative process as if one could actually reproduce it on demand in a laboratory situation without compromising the essence of what is being studied. All of these are legitimate points. However, they are not specific to creativity studies, but apply to any kind of psychological research, whether neurological, cognitive, social, motivational or clinical – when such research is badly conceived and executed. So we take Glăveanu's analysis as relevant to all research, not specifically to that focused on creativity.

The fact is, all research is always in a state of "crisis", by definition. If it were not, it would cease to grow and be creative. A few generations ago many physicists were of the opinion that their discipline had achieved a stage of maturity, where no further major changes could happen. Then, in the first decades of the last century, quantum mechanics opened up a whole new range of unknowns for physicists to explore – and temporarily the crisis was averted.

But let us assume that Glăveanu's analyses are accurate and that the psychology of creativity is beset by problems more than other disciplines. How should we go about bringing the process back on track? The six steps he lists at the end of the article are reasonable suggestions for any scientist to follow and to pass on to his/her students. However, as a generative set of ideas for revitalizing creativity research, we find them rather bland and bureaucratic. They bring to mind a story that is told by the descendants of Niels Bohr about their illustrious relative. According to the story, after Bohr received his Nobel Prize in 1923 for developing the model that started quantum mechanics, he was invited to Moscow to give a talk at the lab of Lev Landau, who was the then star of Russian physics, well supported by the Soviet government. During the visit, a Russian journalist asked Bohr at a press conference: "Professor Bohr, how do you explain the fact that your little lab in the small country of Denmark has achieved such remarkable results in physics, while the Moscow lab, despite huge investments by our government, has failed to achieve them?" After a minute of hesitation, Bohr answered along the following lines: "I think our success is due to the fact that if I make a mistake, anyone in the lab feels free to call me stupid." However, either because of a misunderstanding or because it seemed a more logical explanation, Bohr's answer was translated into Russian as: ". . . Because if anyone in my lab makes a mistake, I feel free to call him stupid." After the conference, the KGB called Landau in, and asked how come he didn't call his students stupid. "But I do, I do . . ." answered poor Landau. "Apparently not often enough!" responded the KGB officer and ordered Landau to call his students stupid more often. Even though

Landau received the Nobel Prize in physics in 1962, his lab did not produce much after the cure ordered by the secret police was applied.

The reason this historical example came to mind after reading Glăveanu's article is that creativity rarely flourishes by decree, or by imposing rules, or following plans – no matter how reasonable they sound. The one constant requirement for getting to anything resembling creativity is unyielding curiosity about a topic that matters to the person more than almost anything else (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012). And as for the individual's contribution – we need freedom, we need stimulation, we need to take risks, we need people telling us we are stupid if we make mistakes – but above all else, we need the experience of joy that comes from lifting the veil of reality and seeing what might be behind it (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The rest – whatever is required to pursue the curiosity and to bring forth new results – is also necessary, but largely outside the control of the person. These are cultural resources and social supports without which, even the potentially most creative idea will languish and leave no trace. We do need to take into account the socio-cultural matrix if we wish to understand how the ideas germinating in a person's head will turn into components of society and culture (Brannigan, 1981; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; 1999; Simonton, 1991).

This view of scientific work, suggests that the crisis indicated by Professor Glaveanu may be a natural phase in the development of the field. Socialization to the field and achieving a professional level, as well as achieving "peak condition", particularly in the social sciences, requires time (Simonton, 1991; 2004). The first presentation of a new idea rarely results in success, but assuming things go well, the creator, probably after a series of revisions, will have a chance to present the work to a wider audience. Recognition of the discovery or innovation in science is measured, inter alia, by the number of citations and awards (Feist, 1993; 1997); it takes longer when the degree of structure in the field is looser (Simonton, 2009) and it is difficult to minimize the variance in the formal assessments of competent judges (Simonton, 2013). If the theory or method passes all the "tests", it has a chance of entering the domain permanently, be an inspiration to other researchers and to be implemented in practice. Professor Glăveanu indicates theories that are familiar to every psychologist of creativity (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 12); we would like to note, however, that none of them can be seen as new. When we look at the list of today's most influential psychologists, including researchers of creativity, we can clearly see that their legacy was built up over decades (Diener, Oishi & Park, 2014). We are far from arguing that it is enough to ensure freedom to researchers and ask them to be patient, and then expect that brilliant theories of creativity and reliable methods

of measurements will spring up like mushrooms after the rain. Curiosity, interest, hard work – and love of the work itself are also surely needed. Furthermore it is necessary not to cut corners, to take the easy way out, and be satisfied with superficial conclusions. In other words, if we want the psychology of creativity to gain and maintain respect, we have to do good science.

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