

A Critical Response to “The Psychology of Creativity: A Critical Reading”

Jonathan A. Plucker

University of Connecticut, USA

E-mail address: jonathan.plucker@uconn.edu

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ABSTRACT

Glăveanu (2014b) provides a wide-ranging analysis and critique of the science of creativity. Many of his points are fair and reasonable, and addressing the questions he poses will unquestionably advance the field. But definitional issues receive too much attention, and some of the arguments are over-extended. The six recommendations are difficult to argue against, but would following all of them lead to the more impactful field that Glăveanu desires?

Glăveanu's (2014b) analysis of the field of creativity is provocative and provides further evidence that he is among the field's most insightful thinkers. Writing from his sociocultural perspective, he provides an in-depth analysis of the field and proposes six recommendations for moving the field forward.

Glăveanu carefully frames his paper by noting that his analysis is focused largely on “mainstream’ research” (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 11), and he softens the knife-edge of his comments by stating that, “my own work shows signs of at least some of the questionable practices I discuss below” (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 11). This is a reasonable approach and provides a good foundation for the paper.

I largely agreed with Glăveanu's analysis, and my hard copy of his paper is covered with highlights and comments on points on which we agree. For example, he observes that, “We seem to be asking every kind of question about creativity without listening enough to what others are doing or what they have found” (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 10) and notes that this is a problem in the entire field of psychology, not just the psychology of creativity. He suggests that the role of time has been largely ignored, that we have become too reductionist in how we study and talk about creativity and that many of the idiosyncrasies and traditions of the field tend to disconnect our work from the needs of teachers, families, managers, artists and other practitioners.

All of these points, and many others throughout the paper, feel very accurate to me. His thoughts on the limitations of historiometry and consensual assessment techniques strike me as especially insightful, as do the extensive comments on needed improvements to theory-building within the field (see also Vartanian, 2014). Quite simply, the field can do better in these and related areas, and Glăveanu deserves considerable credit for his willingness to share these observations. I could write many pages emphasizing our considerable points of agreement, but that is not the purpose of this set of critiques, and I ask the reader to keep this in mind when considering the following constructive criticisms.

I have only minor concerns with the general tone and approach of the analysis. For example, many of these issues are common across social science fields (and, I suspect, many other fields). For example, he questions the attraction of neuropsychological research on creativity, leading to concerns about creativity research being largely method-driven. Absolutely, but every social science field experiences this phenomenon – try publishing a paper about education that does not use hierarchical linear modeling! These fads and tendencies are largely the result of human nature, and creativity researchers should not be faulted for having the same tendencies.

In a similar vein, Glăveanu's concerns about the types of questions being asked and answered are well-taken, but they go a bit too far. For example, creativity journals are increasingly publishing research from Chinese scholars, and much of this research involves replication of studies that have been well-researched in Western cultures. This development may give the impression of a lack of originality and boundary-pushing that Glăveanu decries, but we need to be sensitive to our Chinese colleagues' desire to replicate previous work to determine if it is relevant to the Chinese context. This is both reasonable and an important and necessary step for advancing the science of creativity (see Makel, Plucker & Hegarty, 2012; Makel & Plucker, 2014a, 2014b).

For example, Yi, Hu, Plucker and McWilliams (2013) conducted a conceptual replication of Torrance's (1968) seminal study on the fourth grade slump. Few previous replications have been successful, but Yi et al. were curious about whether a Chinese sample of students would show developmental differences related to their grade level. The results were significantly different from previous research, in that the students exhibited a slump, contrary to many studies with Western samples, but the slump occurred much later than Torrance observed. It also extended the previous research by examining the role of school climate on creativity. Was this study motivated by questions that were "bold, new, and surprising" (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 27)? Not really, but the study provided helpful information for practitioners (another of Glăveanu's recommendations) and some insights into

the role societal and organizational variables may play in the development of creativity.

Given Glăveanu's sociocultural perspective, his emphasis on the need for a distributed approach to creativity development (Glăveanu, 2014a) is not surprising, and it corresponds well with my colleagues' work with distributed conceptions of talent development (McWilliams & Plucker, 2014; Plucker & Barab, 2005). That said, I do not find this concept to be described in sufficient detail. How would a sociocultural model of distributed creativity look different from the individual differences and systems theories approaches that are widely used today? More discussion of this vision would be of great assistance to the field.

Our only area of major disagreement is found in the lengthy section on definitional issues. Intriguingly, he cites our paper on these issues (Plucker, Beghetto & Dow, 2004), in which we called for better use and explicit stating of definitions in creativity research, but then he does not share our proposed definition that addresses many of his concerns. Glăveanu correctly states that Stein's (1953, p. 311) definition, emphasizing novelty and usefulness, is the basis for most research in the field, but he does not note that the Stein definition has subtle aspects that address some of his own sociocultural concerns. Stein very specifically noted that a creativity product needed to be "accepted ... by a group in some point in time". Stein has never been given enough credit for his acknowledgement that creativity is in the eye of the beholder (and that his definition accounts for this relativity), and that judgments about a work's creativity may vary across time. Our definition sought to extend this and related conceptualizations by formally acknowledging the role of context, which includes but can go far beyond time, group context, and other external variables: "Creativity is the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group produces a *perceptible product* that is both *novel and useful* as defined within a *social context*" (Plucker, Beghetto & Dow, 2004, p. 90, emphasis in original).

Quite frankly, continued discussion about definitions feels like we are chasing each other down the proverbial rabbit hole. Variations on what we proposed in 2004 (e.g., Simonton, 2012) are, from our perspective, already included in the definition, and little progress is being made here. However, a less-emphasized point in Glăveanu's analysis, the "need to make explicit one's *paradigmatic assumptions*" (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 13, emphasis in original), is very fair. Journal editors should require any published creativity research to provide the authors' definition of creativity and, if relevant, paradigmatic lens at the beginning of each paper. That alone would address many of Glăveanu's major concerns and provide the field with a stronger conceptual foundation as it moves forward.

Somewhat surprisingly, I find the recommendations (Glăveanu, 2014b, pp. 27-28) to be the least provocative part of the paper, in large part because they do not necessari-

ly focus on the author's main question, when he observes early on that the field is rapidly developing, but "*developing towards what?*" (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 10, emphasis in original). I am not sure this question is ever answered in the paper, and the recommendations dance around this issue. For example, one can hardly deny that we should be asking "bold, new, and surprising questions," (Glăveanu, 2014b, p. 27), but if the field does not have a shared understanding of our ultimate goals, then will asking bold, new questions do anything more than make the same old material feel more exciting, when it really is not? Oddly, the aspect of the paper that most excites me – the call for a new, unified direction for the field and a move away from rampant reductionism – is somewhat cancelled out by recommendations that are mostly reductionist (e.g., ask better questions, take definitions more seriously, reconsider units of analysis, develop new methods, build better theory, have more practical conclusions).

I agree with most of these recommendations, but one could follow each of them and the directionless – or multi-directional – nature of the field would be unchanged. Our scholarship would be undoubtedly improved, but to what end? Glăveanu deserves a great deal of credit for pushing us to reexamine the field, but I am sure he agrees that this is merely the start of a much more involved, lengthy conversation.

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Corresponding author at: Jonathan A. Plucker, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, 2131 Hillside Road U-3007, Storrs, CT 06269-3007.
E-mail: jonathan.plucker@uconn.edu