

Boredom, Messianism, and Primordial Broth

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ABSTRACT

The paper presented is a commentary on Prof. Vlad P. Glăveanu's paper published in the previous volume of the journal. In reaction to his inspiring and valuable text, while confirming the vast majority of his detailed observations, I have articulated a different opinion about its main conclusion: the presence of a crisis in the domain of the psychology of creativity. In my opinion such a crisis does not exist. On the contrary: intense, though rather unsystematic, development may be observed within the discipline. This standpoint is explained in detail in my commentary.

IS IT WORTH WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH?

In 2003, in a digressive footnote to my doctoral thesis (published six years later), I somewhat viciously expressed my personal opinion: “in comparison with other fields of the humanities and even with social sciences, the philosophy of psychology (i.e., its metamesage, or fundamental assumptions) is marked by *unusually* strong conservatism. In the absence of discussions over the principals (due to lack of interest), conservatism manifests itself implicitly — in scientific practice (Chruszczewski, 2009, p. 111). In other words, instead of babbling, one should do research. Of course the way to do research is commonly known, i.e., experimentalism, inductive statistics. Theorizing should be — as far as possible — avoided, at least until one gets old; however even then it is safer to content oneself with criticizing younger colleagues (preferably in anonymous reviews). I am all the more grateful to Prof. Glăveanu for his invigorating article (Glăveanu, 2014) because even though discussions on essential issues, including the way of doing science (contrary to the verbatim understanding of what I have written above), have taken place in the history of psychology, they have always been far too scarce. I would also like to mention here, on the one hand, the opinions of Ambrose (1996) and Karwowski (2012) which con-

verge with many of Glăveanu's theses, and on the other hand, the text of Baer (2011), which is highly critical of metanarrative nostalgia. They both provide a very interesting theoretical context for the following comments on Glăveanu's article.

I will restrain myself from repeating here all the detailed arguments made by the author, with whom by the way, I am often inclined to agree. I will only mention, among other things, the great quantitative increase in research on the psychology of creativity countered, at the same time, by a strong deficit in valuable synthesis and new theories, and the phenomenon of focusing research on and through research techniques, which includes the emphasis on improvement of measurement methods, rather than on problems. This has been true for a long time now, for already Hudson (1967) wrote about the risk of statistical and test reductionism in psychology, and yet "the world has moved forward" since his times. Nevertheless, some concepts in the psychology of creativity, including those stemming from multivariate analysis, are still quite sophisticated, whilst, for example, in the psychology of personality, the factorial approach has reached its Olympus of reductionism in the form of one general factor of personality (Musek, 2007). At this point, the question comes to mind: *is only the psychology of creativity in crisis?* I will return to this problem later.

Glăveanu's remark that the study of creativity, as indeed other types of research as well, does not take place in a socio-political vacuum, but on the contrary, is part and parcel of a certain ideology, is in my view rare, precious and original. The individualistic orientation on competing entities who contribute to the production of values of which the final goal is to increase both consumption and socioeconomic hiatus, which he considers dominant in theories and research on creativity (while dealt with critically from a left-wing standpoint), is also worthy of appreciation and wider discussion. The fact that sociology, for example, has had no problem in recognizing the political context of ways of practicing scientific discourse, while psychology has an almost clinical problem with it, is also astonishing.

There is also a need, as Glăveanu points out, for critical reflection upon the definitions that determine the directions of research and types of questions posed, while other questions are left unspoken. At the same time he writes — in the spirit of Lyotard (1979/1984), or even Sartre (1943/1972), if not Hegel himself (1807/1977) — that *every act of analysis is a kind of violence against reality*. How rare an observation among representatives of the empirical sciences!

But can modern methodology provide a conclusive study of such systematic, dynamic, contextually entangled and time-varying relations as the phenomenon of creativity, as in

my opinion Glăveanu understands it? I am afraid that such methods are (so far?) nonexistent, or else they are not known to most researchers (including me). An interesting harbingers of methodological progress which might also be employed within the realm of the psychology of creativity is perhaps the apparatus of *dynamical social psychology*, though unfortunately somewhat complicated (Nowak & Vallacher, 1998).

If we do not stand up to the challenge, we may face an all too familiar postmodern impasse: not wanting to give priority to any point of view at the expense of another and avoiding cognitive violence of the whole at the expense of its parts, we may mistake totalism for totalitarianism and due to the fear of falling into an unlawful dictatorship of thought we will not be able to say anything categorically about anything, or merely *describing* tentative, transient, kaleidoscopic configurations of phenomena while disregarding any kind of classification. In the case of science which aspires to intersubjectivity this leads, however, to aporia and epistemic failure, unless we are ready to trust the popular, contemporary, feminist philosopher Butler (1990, p. 15) who writes that “without the presupposition or goal of “unity”, which is, in either case, always instituted at a conceptual level, provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity.” However, it is unlikely that psychologists representing a rather essentialist orientation would voluntarily agree to such a thing. Nevertheless, such processes can occur without their conscious consent.

It is a peculiar paradox that Glăveanu, aware of restrictions inherent in the cognitive apparatus of contemporary psychology of creativity, deconstructs this apparatus, while complaining about the dispersion of results and the lack of great theoretical syntheses. It is either-or. For a long time we have been departing from scientific theories (and in the domain of culture from world-views) that are general, comprehensive and aspiring, however not always explicitly, to the rank of absolute truth in favour of theories that are local, particular, specific and relative. This can be observed in psychology, including the psychology of creativity, e.g., in the discussion on its generality or specificity (i.e., Baer, 1998). Such divergence, which maximizes the variety of results, contexts and perspectives, could be potentially creative, if there were to be a reconfiguration of components together with their (in a way convergent) synthesis.

Should we yearn for the return of great, or at least big metanarratives? Prof. Glăveanu recalls some great names from the past. However, the issue is that earlier in the history of psychology, theories of larger calibre were sometimes shaped by the rhetorical talents of their authors, and their often imposing general knowledge, the courage to express personal beliefs and their extreme insensitivity to criticism, rather than by arguments which

proceed from observation and research carried out by them. Freud, Jung and Laing are examples of this. Today the situation is different. And let us also not forget that the veracity of numerous elements of these early theories was negated on the basis of more objective reasons. Of course I am well aware that creative and innovative concepts do not have to be entirely correct or agreeable with all available data. A creator does not have to be the grandmaster of accuracy. Opening a new perspective is oftentimes more important than a carefully written prescription. Unfortunately, it seems to me that in today's era, dominated by the worship of scrupulous, efficient and — as far as possible — continuous scientific productivity, which should additionally be accepted in the review system adopted by journals, revolutionary ideas are far more difficult to postulate (cf. Charlton, 2009). Thus, there are no great theorists in our field or else they are not heard, or otherwise deemed untrustworthy.

Maybe we should return to Butler's remark and hope that a certain level of deregulation of the system (here: the psychology of creativity) and overburdening it with test results will lead back to *spontaneous, parallel and bottom-up reorganizations* which will be like new bubbles in a broth that has been bubbling for some time. Forasmuch waiting for a new grand theorist may be, I am afraid, like waiting for the messiah.

IS IT REALLY THAT BAD?

Despite its limitations, the psychology of creativity has been booming since Guilford. So is it actually that bad? It is always easier to diagnose a critical state of something, if we first determine what the ambitious criteria of 'normal' are. Does such an intention not echo in the text under discussion? Glăveanu's ideas are, after all, convincing, his claims to reality are usually accurate and the outlined aspirations — extremely ambitious (although they are heuristically and thus quite generally, delineated). If we want to bring his theoretical thinking to the extreme (even if it is a logical extreme) we might say 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.

Therefore, I would like to oppose the impression that might impose itself after reading Glăveanu's very interesting article that the psychology of creativity — perhaps in comparison with other fields of psychology — is in some special way *deficient*, stuck in a *particular* crisis, and, while creating nothing new, merely administers outdated concepts by substituting conceptual thinking with methodological impetus. In my view, the psychology of creativity is not in a different position from the rest of psychology, and perhaps some of the other socio-humanistic fields as well, although I lack sufficient orientation to make this

claim with full conviction. And if we were to focus on the psychology of intelligence or personality, would we not see *similar* symptoms of crisis? And is it inevitably a crisis?

One can criticize methods of questionnaire and test diagnoses for their peculiar artificiality. Cannot experimental situations be artificial as well? Tests of divergent production can represent the totality of the creative process only to a very limited extent. But cannot the same be said about IQ tests in relation to the processes of thinking and solving problems? And yet IQ tests are, within their own limits, accurate and reliable (indeed more so than “creativity tests”), and their employment in research—due to the objectification of mental assessments — has yielded very good results. Is knowledge of the genetic basis of human behaviour not scattered? Or was there recently a breakthrough in developmental psychology thanks to some new Vygotsky? Or rather, as I inclined to think, do we still have theoretical polyphony and a huge variety of research? Such questions are endless. We can also ask a different question: *are these signs of exhaustion, or maybe of unsystematic development?*

Conclusion: there is not a greater crisis in the psychology of creativity than in other areas of psychology; what is more, I am not sure whether psychology (including the psychology of creativity) is in crisis at all, although — when reading Glăveanu — I believe it is! However, some time after reading his article, I think that this “crisis” is an inevitable stage of development which follows understandable *boredom* caused by the exploitation of common research directions, easy acceptance of existing definitional and conceptual systems and finally of the hypertrophy of data analyzed by routine methods. However, if the “crisis” is to be “overcome” it will happen “bottom-up” rather than “top-down”. The real hope lies neither in a theorist-messiah nor genius-creator, but in the *primordial broth* — bubbling with the promise of startling reconfigurations — which we all co-create.

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