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Advancing Creativity Theory and Research: A Socio-cultural Manifesto

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R O B E R T J . S T E R N B E R G

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## Advancing Creativity Theory and Research: A Socio-cultural Manifesto

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### ABSTRACT

This manifesto, discussed by 20 scholars, representing diverse lines of creativity research, marks a conceptual shift within the field. Socio-cultural approaches have made substantial contributions to the concept of creativity over recent decades and today can provide a set of propositions to guide our understanding of past research and to generate new directions of inquiry and practice. These propositions are urgently needed in response to the transition from the Information Society to the Post-Information Society. Through the propositions outlined here, we aim to build common ground and invite the community of creativity researchers and practitioners to reflect up, study, and cultivate creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

*Keywords:* creativity, socio-cultural psychology, manifesto, context, culture.

A manifesto is defined as a written statement of beliefs and aims. It is meant to mark a conceptual shift within a field and to be generative in terms of research directions. Our aim here is to capitalize on the advances made in creativity studies over the past century and, most of all, the contributions brought by socio-cultural research. In particular, we aim to build common ground and invite the community of creativity researchers and practitioners to reflect upon, study, and cultivate creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

At the same time, this Manifesto is written with a sense of urgency, as a response to the accelerating pace in the transition from the Information Society to the Post-Information Society, where physical life will coexist with multiple forms of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic artificial intelligence, and creativity will become a necessity for the dignity and survival of the human species. A key aspect of this response will be scholarly attention to the social-relational, material, contextual, and developmental orientations that various researchers have developed over the last three decades. The authors share these orientations and the assumptions articulated in this Manifesto, but not all identify as socio-cultural theorists. We include psychologists who explore developmental theory, organizational practices, social systems, and individual differences, among others. We also include specialists outside of psychology. All, however, emphasize the importance of the propositions listed below, which are often advanced with socio-cultural research (even if there is no single and final “socio-cultural approach”).

The propositions listed in this Manifesto do not represent an exclusive list but constitute a generative, open, and emergent theoretical system. Any single proposition can be thought of differently and generate fruitful conversations among researchers. When taken together, though, they have the power to transform our understanding of who, how, what, when, where, and why people and societies create. “Breaking” with any of these orientations or complementing them with other views does not disqualify a researcher or research effort from being (at least in part) socio-cultural, just as it would be equally problematic to agree blindly with the points presented here and use them as a box ticking exercise.

#### CREATIVITY IS, AT ONCE, A PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND MATERIAL (PHYSICAL AND EMBODIED) PHENOMENON

This multidimensionality is important because we create not as isolated minds but as embodied beings who participate in a socio-material world. Even if one single study or intervention cannot address all these dimensions simultaneously, the questions, methods, general design, and interpretation of findings should be chosen in view of this complexity. A challenge for the socio-cultural approach is to weave together various dimensions which have historically been studied in isolation or even in opposition to each other, and to address the disciplinary, philosophical, cultural, and political reasons for these oppositions. Integration of multiple dimensions will also require addressing or at least acknowledging the complex underlying perspectives of those dimensions, such as cultural and methodological individualism in the U.S. and elsewhere (and the political implications of individualism *versus* “the collective”), the history of disciplinary fragmentation, separation and opposition (i.e., psychology *versus* sociology, individual *versus* social), and the possibility of adopting new, non-oppositional perspectives.

#### CREATIVITY IS CULTURALLY MEDIATED ACTION

Creativity and culture are intertwined: the former uses the signs and tools made available by the latter to produce new cultural resources that go on to facilitate future creative acts. Language as a cultural artifact plays a particularly important role in the dynamic of creativity. The notion of “culture” is not used here in a reified (by equating it with the ethnic group or country) or politicized manner (by using assumed differences to create and legitimize hierarchies). In the socio-cultural tradition, culture and mind are interdependent and continuously shape each other. Culture is neither external to the person nor static, but constitutive of the mind and of society by offering the symbolic resources required to perceive, think, remember, imagine, and, ultimately, create. The notion of “creative action” tries to encompass, in this context, the psychological, the behavioral, and the cultural. Seeing creativity as a form of doing or making does not deny the role played by creative thinking. Instead, this view integrates creative cognition and ideation – thinking is itself a form of “internalized action” with multiple behavioral echoes and consequences.

#### CREATIVE ACTION IS, AT ALL TIMES, RELATIONAL

There is no form of human creativity that does not rely on direct, mediated, or implicit social interaction or exchanges. Even when working in solitude, we implicitly build on and respond to the views, knowledge, and expectations of other people. While creating, the person can recurrently become his or her own “audience” by standing back and evaluating his or her process and its outcome as others would. It is important to note here that we do not imply that people will always be more creative when working together in explicit collaborations. The social element should not be romanticized; personal conflicts, incompatible styles, and other issues may decrease collaborative creative efforts. However, the lifelong development of creativity cannot be conceived outside of self–other relations. This is expressed from early on in episodes of play, and continues throughout the life-course in the way we collaborate, compete, and rely on others in the production of meaningful novelties.

#### CREATIVITY IS MEANINGFUL

Creative outcomes are not only new and appropriate for a certain task; they can give meaning and even joy to our existence and, as such, represent a key marker of our humanity. Creative acts – at all levels of expression and eminence – offer a legacy that can soften our impending mortality. It is important to remember here that the value of creative acts depends as well on social and historical perspectives and positions. Creativity is a process that has contributed to liberation and emancipation, but also to oppression, alienation, and environmental destruction. The value and meaning of creativity need to be understood in a contextual manner, both acknowledging the realities of benevolent and malevolent intentions and the

complex and unanticipated ways in which they impact the world. At the same time, it is imperative to reflect on how creativity can contribute to the development and cultivation of those values and virtues that lead to living meaningful, peaceful, sustainable, and wise lives.

#### CREATIVITY IS FUNDAMENTAL FOR SOCIETY

Large-scale innovation may lead to the paradigm shifts that change our worlds. Yet, at all levels, creative, spontaneous, and improvised interactions form the basis of human society, from everyday sociability to intensified moments of social change. Beyond “traditional” (socially recognized) domains of creativity such as science, invention, design or the arts, society itself – that is, building, maintaining, and constantly renewing our communal life – should be regarded as a field of creativity. This observation makes us more aware of the oftentimes unnoticed creativity that fuels social interactions, institutions, and social movements. Creativity does not only lead to societal progress through notable inventions and discoveries, it does so also (if not primarily) by changing the way people relate to the world, to others, and to themselves, making them more flexible, more open to the new and, at least in principle, to differences in perspective.

#### CREATIVITY IS DYNAMIC IN BOTH ITS MEANING AND PRACTICE

The understanding and the practice of creativity vary across space and time and thus we cannot operate with any single, reductionist definition of this phenomenon. Novelty and originality, value and appropriateness tend to be considered cross-cultural markers of creativity. And yet, as with any definition, this view is constructed within a historical time and geographical place (in particular, a Western space, during late Modernity). This reality doesn’t make our conclusions any less valid; it just encourages us to recognize judgments about creativity as context-dependent and explore not only what *is* creative but also *why* we call something or someone creative (or not). A dynamic approach to creativity also shifts the attention of researchers to the processes underlying creative activity and to its potential to produce outcomes that will impact possible futures.

#### CREATIVITY IS SITUATED BUT ITS EXPRESSION DISPLAYS BOTH SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS SITUATIONS AND ACROSS DOMAINS

Creativity takes the form of action or activity, and all human action occurs in a given symbolic, social-institutional, and material context. As a result, creativity is constituted to a great extent by the situation and domain in which it is expressed rather than any universal or innate bio-psychological principles. This, among other things, makes creative acts unique – given that no two people and situations are completely alike – and also difficult to predict. At the same time, cultural patterns as well as individual regularities in creative expression do allow us to construct models that are transferable to different domains of creative action and to different contexts. Generalization should be made with great care, though, and in ways that recognize the situated nature of creative action.

#### CREATIVITY NEEDS SPECIFICATION

Creativity research is intrinsically complex, especially when it comes to using tests and other similar instruments. In reporting research, we should use the notion of creativity critically and reflectively. The propositions outlined here describe creativity as a complex phenomenon for which many facets may be identified and studied. If a study measures a facet of creativity (such as divergent thinking or creative self-beliefs), it should be labeled as such – and not equated with “creativity *per se*,” even if this concept is mentioned as a larger referent. We must acknowledge that we always define and measure creativity from within a certain paradigm and discipline. We can argue, epistemologically, for our own choice, but should be mindful of the fact that other paradigms and disciplinary perspectives do exist.

#### CREATIVITY RESEARCH NEEDS TO CONSIDER POWER DYNAMICS BOTH WITHIN OUR ANALYSES AND AS A FIELD OF STUDY

As previously discussed, creative work can have complex positive and negative outcomes depending on social position. As a community of scholars, we must also acknowledge that most papers are produced in conjunction with certain philosophical orientations and/or geographical spaces. Most creativity journals are in English. Our scholars have tended to come from largely privileged social positions in their race, socioeconomic status, and gender. These disparities should make us reflect, as a community, on the power dynamics embedded in our field. How can we challenge hegemonic views? How can we actively increase opportunities that widen participation?

### THE FIELD OF CREATIVITY STUDIES NEEDS BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES WITH STRONG THEORETICAL FOUNDING

Although quantification serves an important purpose, the study of creativity requires a qualitative understanding of the experience, meanings, and processes of creating. Using single, numerical scores for the “creativity” (or creative potential) for a person, product, or process can be problematic, especially when these scores don’t take into account the person as a whole and his/her life circumstances. We need to distinguish how creative achievements and behaviors can be meaningfully quantified (e.g., number of awards or citations, the expression of certain behaviors, ratings made by judges, linguistic markers, and so on), while carefully reflecting on how to interpret these numbers, and not operating based on the blind assumption that using a form of measurement will automatically make the field more “scientific.”

### OLD LITERATURE SHOULD BE REVISITED AND NOT ABANDONED

Scholarship does not “expire” in five years. Creativity studies, as a field, needs to become more aware of its own historical roots, blind spots, and forgotten contributions in order to place current research into a broader theoretical frame. Conversely, both our world and our methodological sophistication is rapidly changing. Just because an idea or hypothesis has not gathered support in the past does not mean it is dead (and vice versa, not every past conception or hypothesis is correct simply because it has been formulated long ago). A new perspective, angle, or implementation may potentially revive long-dismissed concepts.

### CREATIVITY RESEARCHERS HAVE A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Research does not take place in a vacuum, and our scholarship shapes how we portray individual agency, society, and culture – we are thus co-responsible for building more inclusive, tolerant, and sustainable societies through our work. Such responsibilities extend to the questions we ask and the debates we engage in. Here, again, using the concept of creativity critically and reflectively is crucial. Discovering new information for the sake of science itself is a worthy goal, but we argue that contributions which directly impact schools or organizations, enhancing the lives of children, adults, the elderly, and highlighting strengths in underrepresented groups, need to be recognized and actively fostered. Since such applications of creative ideas affect various groups differently, our work is not just to advocate positions but, more importantly, to help illuminate debates on the possibilities of creative work and ensuing changes. Social involvement also helps dispel myths and stereotypes about creativity by providing information to the public about the usefulness, effects, and ubiquity of creativity.

The propositions outlined above guide the work of the group of authors. There is here, though, the danger of the few short sentences on each point appearing to be conclusive. Almost all of the points above could also be presented as largely open questions or topics for further debate – provocations among the authors to think more deeply and develop new research methods. They also constitute an invitation to creativity scholars of all stripes to join in the exploration.

The bedrock propositions – making this a Manifesto, and a socio-cultural one in particular – concern the importance of sociohistorical and material contexts for creative actions and the social, material, and temporal distribution of creative work. This Manifesto represents thus a call to move beyond focusing on the individual alone, isolated from his/her social, material and cultural context. This is *not* a rejection of research on individuals, in particular research into individual differences, but, rather, an invitation to integrate and (re)interpret its concepts, methods and findings within a wider, socio-cultural framework.

Power dynamics is an example of a question that the socio-cultural framework opens. Socio-cultural models have long defined creativity as a social judgment, indicating that social power dynamics are at play. Some of the authors have explicitly discussed the importance of power in what is deemed creative at societal and local – especially educational – levels. Within the last decade there has also been increased interest in the dangers of creativity (sometimes called its “dark side”) and the ethics of creativity. All of this research is just getting started though. There is much left to do, particularly in relation to marginalized or oppressed groups within society. An important question for the latter is how can diverse theories, practices, and pedagogies of creativity co-exist and be recognized in their own terms and in their own right?

Even well-established propositions, like the social mediation of creative actions, call for further investigation under the socio-cultural framework. How does the mediation of existing language, ideas, values, and practices affect creative work in different domains? What is the role played by the self-concept in such mediation? Maybe most importantly, what is the impact of the concept of creativity itself on perception, development, and behavior?

In the end, this group of researchers aims to start a more substantial discussion about theory and epistemology, methodology and practice, and ethics and politics within creativity studies. It is a community coming together to talk, not to teach; to welcome, not to reject; to build, not to tear down. Others are welcome to join in, respond, and contest, for what is more socio-cultural than fostering different perspectives and learning from the tensions among them?

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#### AUTHOR NOTE

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