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# Regional creativity: Cultural and socio-economic differences

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ABSTRACT

Creativity scholars Runco and Charles (1993) asserted that creativity not only requires originality but it also requires some fit or appropriateness. That is why culture is so influential; it defines appropriateness. In a similar vein, Westwood and Low (2003) emphasized that, "creativity takes place within, is constituted and influenced by, and has consequences for, a social context" (p. 236). With the acceleration of globalization, an examination of creativity would benefit from a more culturally sensitive approach. Towards that end, this article has a focus on examining the basic nature of creativity through the lens of cultural and geographical differences, and suggests considerations for viewing creativity in context.

## Introduction

Creativity is context specific (Lubart, 2010). Different regions around the globe have different views of creativity, its conception and purpose. Regional creativity can be seen as the cultural and socio-economic implications that have to be considered when approaching creative problem-solving in a particular context. For instance, while innovation generated in the Silicon Valley might largely be driven by millions of dollars of private investments, in countries with developing economies, creative solutions may be driven instead by the need to fulfill basic needs of the society where resources are scarce. This may be conceptually true; however, at its surface level, it generates a different perception. In the case of countries with developing economies, scarce resources, which prompt tighter restrictions, lead to doing more with less (Radjou & Prabhu, 2015). What is the lesson here? A context-deprived approach that examines creativity across regions might have overlooked an association between improvisational creativity and conditions that limit the availability of goods, services, and resources essential for physical survival. Context matters. This article discusses how views of creativity vary across cultures and suggests careful thoughts for viewing creativity in context.

## The creative person across cultures

People in different contexts have contrasting ways to solve problems and approach them with a particular mindset. Jellen and Urban (1989) offered an example in a test for creative thinking (TCT) applied to children from urban schools in eleven countries with different political, economic, and educational contexts. Their results revealed different score levels depending on the countries' democratic or autocratic values, or the countries' socio-economic level of dependence.

The level of bilingualism can also be an educational constraint to the development of creativity. A study performed on 1,063 Chinese and Malayan children, showed that monolingual children are more fluent and flexible but less original and elaborated than bilingual children (Torrance, Gowan, Wu, & Aliottiet, 1970). Similarly, Carringer (1974) suggested from a study performed on 353 high school Mexican students that bilingualism does enhance creative thinking.

People have different views of creativity depending on the cultures they belong to. As suggested by Niu and Kaufman (2013), the Chinese notion of creativity is associated with perfection and excellence that can be acquired throughout life and that can be promoted by extrinsic motivation where appropriateness and acceptance of the environment are very important. On the other hand, the U.S. notion is connected to looking for early inspiration and novelty that can be obtained mainly through intrinsic motivation without necessarily working collaboratively with the environment.

Sociocultural needs are not always fulfilled by globally available solutions created by people from different locations with different mindsets. As such, discrete contexts are likely to involve different approaches in the creative act. It depends on the problem to solve, the need to be addressed, or the opportunity to exploit, and it relies on the type of engagement, whether it emerges from solitary, participative, or communitarian efforts (Glăveanu & Sierra, 2015). For example, Medellín, a city rocked by violence in Colombia, was transformed into the most innovative city in the world, as ranked by Citi and the Wall Street Jour-

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nal (Puccio, Cabra, & Schwagler, 2017). Impoverished areas of Medellín were provided with public modern libraries designed by recognized architects to construct buildings that would inspire pride, an emotional response that ultimately led citizens to police themselves. Strategically, aesthetics was leveraged as a tool for social transformation. Driven by a mantra, "*the most beautiful for the most humble*," it ignited the return of dignity as its policing agent. This example speaks to the threats that stereotypes can create and how caution must be observed at the time of generalization (Kaufman, 2006). In this example, the assumption was tested that a violent city cannot police itself.

## The creative process across cultures

The creative process involves action steps that lead to a novel outcome (Lubart, Glăveanu, De Vries, & Camargo, 2019). An Eastern view of creativity is fatalistic in a sense that the output is in the hands of outside forces. Its process is also nonlinear and seeks to reinvigorate what already exists into new combinations and interpretations (Lubart, et al., 2019). Tan (2016) described it as a type of creativity that is evolutionary. It progresses in a circular manner, reconceptualizing customs instead of detaching from them, whereas, a Western approach moves towards a new position (von Franz, 1995). Tan (2016) explained it as a creativity that is more revolutionary. Eastern approaches to creativity are also generally less preoccupied with outcome and more with how creativity contributes to personal fulfillment (Lubart, 1998). Tan (2016) referred to personal fulfillment as self-cultivation, which "involves a creative process of self-directed learning, authentic moral motivation, and self-actualization where an individual examines, illuminates, and shapes the meaning of one's lived experiences" (p. 82).

In fact, in the Tibetan language, a word does not exist for "creativity" or "being creative." A word that is used instead and that comes closest is "natural." Put another way, to be more creative one only needs to be more natural (Kelley & Kelley, 2013).

India's creative process is directly connected with spirituality as the concept of self is highly intrapersonal. Often, meditation serves as a conduit to facilitate an individual's connection to creativity; however, it requires a rejection of false ideas of oneself. Only through this rejection will one connect with the truth, which leads to enlightenment (Bhawuk, 2019). Compare this process to a more Western approach to creativity where the focus is placed on the outcome (Dubina & Ramos, 2016), and to deliberateness whereby creativity can be demanded. Some scholars have explained these differences in this way: Some societies believe it does not have mastery over its environment (subjugation); while other societies believe that they do (mastery), yet other societies value more strongly maintaining synchronization (harmony) with the environment (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Lane, DiStefano, & Maznevski, 2019).

In a cross-cultural study of Taiwanese and U.S. subjects, researchers found that Chinese subjects involved in their study were more inclined to perceive and to organize things holistically (Liu & Hsu, 1974; Paschal, Kuo, & Schurr, 1981). That is, Chinese subjects saw things in wholes and had a stronger consideration for the context. Meanwhile, the U.S. subjects tended to divide, break things down and de-contextualize.

In Latin America, the conditions in many parts are tropical and agreeable, which fosters an "…open-ended environment, a free atmosphere in which everything just happens" (Rapaille, 2001, p.14). The creativity in many regions of Latin America is hence subjective, playful, colorful, sanguine, festive, superficial, hedonistic, happier, and spontaneous (Rodríguez-Estrada & Escobar-Borrero, 1996). What abounds, therefore, is a preference for expression over a search for solutions to vexing problems.

Compare the Latin American approach to that of the typical Anglo Saxons. The Anglo Saxons are more pragmatic. In Latin America they are traditionally more theoretical and aesthetical (Rodríguez-Estrada & Escobar-Borrero, 1996). To be sure, the Anglo Saxon is considered as distant, methodical, persistent, austere, serious, and hard, which are derivatives of harsh climatic conditions that forced them to scramble and work incredibly hard to survive (Rapaille, 2001). The Anglo Saxon created products that were based on necessity, a reflection of a person's struggle against or dominion over the environment, and reflected the arduous and methodical efforts that were required to generate an outcome (Rodríguez-Estrada & Escobar-Borrero, 1996). Through the passing of time, these traits reinforced cultural values that emphasized personal ambition and achievement (Rapaille, 2001).

In the Middle East, the creative process is influenced by Qur'anic methodology (Al-Karasneh & Saleh, 2010; Iqbal, 2020). Accordingly, the Qur'an emphasizes four methodologies namely: the Methodology of Travelling and Observation, the Methodology of Seeing, the Methodology of Hearing and the Methodology of Reflection, with an end in mind to strengthen one's relationship with Allah, finding the truth and serving the society. In Zarif et al. (2013), the definition provided by Yousif (1999) was cited and defined creativity as, "the process of realizing, applying or elaborating the principles and ideals mentioned in the Qur'an at any time or place, when the act is needed, in order to meet the challenges that arise in the spheres of life" (p.122). Yousif (1999) underscored that the creative act should aim at applying the Divine Principles to all aspects of life. Al-Mazeidy (1993) defined the creative process as "…designing new forms that are beneficial for humanity and are in accordance with the Islamic shari'ah and principles" (p. 306). In this way, Al-Karasneh and Saleh (2010) asserted that creative Muslims are to be set apart from others by following the divine guidance from Allah.

De Vries and Lubart (2017) posited that divergent and convergent thinking research might benefit from insights that emerge when cultural factors are considered. Although they examined scientific creativity, their work is easily appreciated in contexts outside of science, namely social factors that welcome creativity as demonstrated through evaluative and improvisational thinking.

Cropley, Kaufman, and Cropley (2011) asserted that an innovation process includes many steps such as marketing, market research, sales, advertising, distribution, and customer service. One consideration is to involve an examination for differences of these steps across cultures. Let's take the Tellis, Stremersch, and Yin (2003) study, which found that sales of new products varied in their takeoff times across several European countries and categories. For instance, product take off times were almost half as long in Scandinavian countries as in Mediterranean countries. These differences as mentioned in this section might inadvertently be overlooked when examining creativity.

## The creative product across cultures

The level of innovation that is generated in a culture is relative to the degree of support that is provided for entrepreneurial initiatives within that culture (Herbig & Dunphy, 1998). In a study that examined the association between culture and perception, Mooij (2017) found a significant relationship between consumer behaviors (e.g., behaviors related to ownership of a computer, laptop, usage of the internet; activities like buying expensive shoes, travel and exercise; attitudes towards technology; need for showing success; and male-female roles). Data comprised subjects from a number of European countries that explored why people respond differently to innovative products.

An unfortunate stereotype has been casted that Asians are not creative (Ng, 2001; Ho, Peng, & Chan, 2002; Wang & Mao, 1996). However, studies indicated that Asian creators operate under different principles such as self-discipline, conformity, moral goodness, and regard for tradition (Niu & Kaufman, 2005). For example, Keene (1969) described a Japanese ceramics master who would dedicate endless hours and months to create a simple clay bowl. The bowl had to be imitated, which in turn was in keeping with the centuries-long practices of raku making. This style of ceramics required a set of criteria of simplicity, imperfection (i.e., imperfect sets are better because they give the sensation that there is room for growth), asymmetry, and restraint (Keene, 1969). On the other hand, the Western set of criteria encompasses complexity,

perfection, symmetry, and visual impact. Consistent findings through the aforementioned studies suggested that creativity in one cultural setting may not apply to creativity in another (Wong and Niu, 2013)

Cabra, Joniak, and Talbot (2005) in a qualitative study that explored how organizational climates in Colombian companies help and hinder workplace creativity were careful to add personal examples of innovative or adaptive creativity before starting each semi-structured interview. These examples were provided to each interviewee to overcome any implicit theory of creativity as typically seen as innovative creativity (Puccio & Chimento, 2001).

## The context of relationships across cultures

In a Western context, organizational incentives differ and include non-monetary enticements that support self-actualization and esteem needs (Maslow, 1971). For example, Sirota and Greenwood (1971) conducted a study involving 19,000 employees from companies around the world to identify the most important organizational goals. They found some significant differences among the 46 countries that were involved in the study. Latin Americans and Southern Europeans, for example, when compared to North Americans, ranked individual achievement somewhat less important. Both groups stressed the importance of fringe benefits (e.g., a company car, subsidized meals, health insurance) with the Southern Europeans placing higher emphasis on job security. Furthermore, the Japanese graded challenges and good work conditions as important, but advancement and autonomy as low. On the other hand, Northern Europeans viewed getting ahead and recognition goals as less important but ranked job accomplishment as important (Sirota & Greenwood, 1971).

Hofstede (2001) in his seminal work on cultural orientations made clear the varying differences among Latin American cultures, of which the same can be stated among the Asian cultures. It is why Yong, Mannucci, and Lander (2020) stressed that these differences make it a challenge for researchers to accurately identify the cultural constructs that account for ways creativity is fostered within a vast region.

In their mixed methods study, which included a meta-analysis of 584 effect sizes from 205 studies set in 38 different countries, results suggested that members of a given country whose bundles (i.e., cultural value dimensions that describe a given country and its potency in compelling these values) underscore cultural tightness (e.g. collectivism) are more likely to achieve creative outcomes if they develop and leverage the components that are fostered by the largest possible number of cultural values included in the bundle (Yong et al., 2020). Inversely, their exploratory study insightfully indicated that members of a given country that involve a loose bundle (where the conditions for tightness are more cavalier) can obtain creative output by formulating components that are not fostered or even frowned upon by cultural values contained in its bundle.

A big takeaway from this study points towards a shift in how creativity should be understood in cultures and suggestions to examine the moderating effects within cultural bundles. As Yong et al. (2020) reframed it, first examine *how* the bundles achieve creativity rather than creativity itself. To strengthen their argument, they leveraged their findings by pointing to the "local advantage" that creators have within tight cultures, which might very well include applying tools that foster their creativity locally, and where the culture accentuates its development (Yong et al., 2020; Sundararajan & Raina, 2015).

Myanmar is a good example to support the assertions made earlier. In a survey using Hofstede's work, the results indicated that Myanmar's culture is low Power Distance (the extent to which less powerful members of organizations, institutions or societies accept and expect unequal power distributions), highly Feminine (preference for cooperation, relationship oriented, both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life), moderately Individualistic, high Uncertainty Avoidance, and moderately Long Term in its Orientation. Yet the results came as a surprise to the authors of this paper because a typical values portrait of countries in the "East" would consist of high Power Distance, Masculine, Collectivist, moderate Uncertainty Avoidance, and a Long-Term Orientation (Rarick & Nickerson, 2006).

People contributing to a creative goal have to be aware of the contextual meanings of a concept or word in different cultures. Cabra (2006) identified a list challenges that include *biases*, which are problems that occur when a concept measured is not the same across cultural groups (Leung & Zhang, 1996). For example, the word "character" has a negative connotation in Colombia (strong-headed, aggressive). Inversely, in the U.S., the meaning is positive (i.e., charm, moral fiber, integrity), while in Great Britain, this word denotes an entertainer or a person who likes to draw attention to him or herself.

Cabra (2006) cited several cross-cultural researchers that made the *single-method study* issue more explicit. Chapman (1996) argued that it is conceivable for researchers to incorrectly assure that each respondent answered exactly the same questions on an instrument and that findings would be comparable from one group to another. Adler (1983) posited that people do not perceive the world in the same way as others who speak a different language. McDonald (2000) emphasized that variables such as family structure, religion, level of affluence, and cultural and personal values are at times not considered in cross-cultural studies.

Hofstede (2001) identified an "ecological fallacy" challenge, which occurs when countries are treated as individuals, which is considered a *level of analysis* problem. This occurs when country-level correlations are confounded with individual-level correlations. Inversely, a problem arises when individual-level data are generalized to the societal level, which Hofstede (2001) coined as a "reverse ecological fallacy."

As an abridgment to the points covered above, Roberts (1970) stressed that when exploring creativity in other cultures, researchers should consider: 1) an understanding of behavioral causes in settings in a single culture, then 2) formulate middle-level theories to guide explorations, and then 3) derive relevant propositions for a national research in lieu of solely comparing subject responses to instruments adapted from various countries.

## The material environment across cultures

The city of Lima in Peru is one of the driest places on earth. The lack of potable water is one of the main problems for people living in a highly humid region. This lack of one resource, in contrast to an existing abundance in another, triggered an innovative idea for students and professors from UTEC, the University of Engineering and Technology, who used a billboard to capture and turn atmospheric humidity into drinking water. This is what Radjou and Prabhu (2015) referred to as a motivation for frugal innovation. That is, taking what is abundant to address what is scarce. Hence, it's not about doing more with more, but doing more with less to cover basic human needs.

The way that people perceive affordances in an environment, that is, the possible uses of an object or land (Gibson, 2014), differs too. For instance, a person in a capitalist environment can develop a computer operating system that generates for him or her millions of dollars, whereas, in a different environment, where an operating system was not intended to concentrate on wealth (rather, to be freely open for the world to benefit) can still generate millions. Linus Torvalds, the creator of the open operating system, was raised in Finland yet subscribed to communistic ideologies–his father was a member of the Communist Party. This in turn shaped Torvalds' mindset that later formulated the different uses and motivations for the same artifact that evolved through an international community of programmers all cooperating to continuously innovate and update the original artifact (Isaacson, 2014).

Affordances in one cultural context suggest that artifacts can be exploited and validated in a particular culture but be deemed unacceptable (or ethically and globally inadmissible) in another. For instance, the city of Bogotá, Colombia, was presented with a major quality of life problem. Its traffic, made worse by reckless driving and mass disobedience of traffic rules, also compounded the problem by adding to air pollution.

Back then, the city's traffic police were known to easily settle an infraction by accepting bribes. Before long, the city's unorthodox mayor discharged all the traffic police and replaced them with about 400 mimes that were hired to mock people's traffic violations and to instruct better behavior. They would hand out thumbs-up/thumbs-down cards to help pedestrians and other drivers shame the bad drivers (Dubner, 2012). It was a success. Where the mimes operated, traffic decreased and fatalities declined by 50%–traffic police were later reinstated after retraining, but only after traffic had upgraded (Dubner, 2012). As the Guardian reported, Colombians fear ridicule more than being fined (Marsh, 2013, October 28).

Take this solution and apply it in the United States. The affordance this remedy proffers is likely to be met with harassment complaints and even violence as Americans dislike being made fun of and having their personal space encroached upon. Moreover, the United States has a tighter rule of law and would find this approach unnecessary.

As stated by Glăveanu (2016, p. 14), "culture not only sets up norms for using objects, but also restricts certain uses." An example of this are the ten cities from around the world (e.g., Paris, Mexico City, Bogotá, London, Bologna, Johannesburg, Addis Ababa, Madrid, Oslo, and Copenhagen) that are engaged in consistent a-day-without-a-car practices (Doheim, Farag, & Badawi, 2020). Just imagine a city like Paris that is free of motor vehicle traffic from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on a Sunday. Now try to imagine the *entire* city of Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, or all of Manhattan attempting to deploy a similar car-free practice and successfully convincing its populations to adopt and sustain it. Why is that a challenge? These societies value individualism, a high value that is placed on people's time and their need for privacy and freedom. What is the point made here? Disruptive ideas are relative. What is considered disruptive in one setting may not be so in another.

## Conclusion

Cultural and socio-economic contexts have an impact in the way people develop their creative potential. This has to be considered when exploring creativity or when introducing a Western-developed creative process models and techniques. A creative product is also valued differently, seen as having different levels of creativity, and solve problems according to the context in which is going to be used. In a culture that values high context, that is, where the communication is implicit, subtle, and filled with meta messages, nonverbal communication will come across more intensified. Think about a blind person's much more calibrated sense of hearing and how it compensates for the loss of sight. Assume that people in the U.S. value low context communication (direct and explicit). Their nonverbal communication would speak volumes to people in high context cultures thereby making it a challenge to co-collaborate in unfamiliar settings, and might force mixed signals. As such, patience would be required under such circumstances.

There is a big difference between a stereotype and a generalization. When cultural anthropologists content-analyze their data, their intent is not to create cultural orientations that in the end categorize its subjects. Instead, the purpose of assigning an orientation to a culture is to generalize the findings for further inquiry and discussion (Walker, Walker, & Schmitz, 2003). It is only when these generalizations are permitted to become stereotypes or gross simplifications that it makes it difficult to establish validity in research studies. Rather, a generalization is applied for exploration, to test assumptions, and to learn about the culture through trial and error until the process helps to generate understanding. By no measure should the learning be fixed. In science, we should have more questions than answers. Our approach to learning should be open, and should not reject conflicting information. To this end, we should explore our own stereotypes. A stereotype is really about a refusal to learn, which eventually magnifies our biases. Instead, be genuinely open. Look in the mirror. Allow to be influenced. It does not mean that we should agree with a cultural tradition for example. Rather, it suggests that we should seek to comprehend and understand.

We should take a divergent approach in how we solicit information. Be insatiably inquisitive and take the time to read the literature, to inquire about ourselves with regard to our own reactions to data and fieldwork (Pearsall, 2007). We should allow cultural orientations to transform us through new experiences. We should also seek feedback and explore our biases, assumptions and perceptions. We would benefit from applying cultural due diligence and mindfulness to anticipate how the new culture will impact our ability to lead research (De Dreu, 2010; Leung & Wang, 2015; Radclyffe-Thomas, 2014). For example, Corazza and Lubart (2021) offered a framework of analysis that can be applied as a cross-cultural map. This framework comprises two continuums, in which intelligent and/or creative behavior can be embedded into a two-by-two matrix with a space-time continuum (i.e., tightness vs. looseness of the relevant conceptual space and available time). Such a map could support us in deliberately seeing cultural orientations in a more comprehensive and effective way. In the end, we know we have arrived when we see a shift in our motivation and willingness to go into unfamiliar places more contiguously (Gregersen, Morrison, & Black, 1998). This implies that we are willing to take the initiative, risks, and make a commitment to applying cultural due diligence (Srinivas, 1995).

## Declaration of Competing Interest

This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor is under review at, another journal or other publishing venue.

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