

EMOTIONS AND CREATIVITY

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Emotions are related to creativity in three main ways: First, as *antecedents to creativity*; second, *creativity can be an emotional experience*; and, third, *emotions themselves can be creative products*. Let me say a few words about each of these three ways.

Emotions as Antecedents to Creativity

This has been the topic of much research in recent years. The results are, to my mind, quite confusing. But two points are worth mentioning because of their consistency. First, persons tend to be more creative when in a positive mood. The implication seems clear: If you want to encourage creativity in a person, do him or her a kindness. Unfortunately, for some persons, or for some phases of the creative process, a negative mood is also helpful.

Second, a predisposition to clinical depression is more common among creative writers and artists (but not scientists) than among the general population. This is not necessarily in contradiction to the first point. Creative episodes tend to occur as depression lifts and the person enters a mildly manic phase.

Creativity as an Emotional Experience

This is the Aha! Or *Eureka* phenomenon. It has been little investigated for the simple reason that it is difficult to capture in a laboratory setting. Hence, it is poorly understood; or even misunderstood. Creative insights may indeed occur suddenly, as many anecdotal accounts illustrate; but so, too, do many nonsensical thoughts and imagery. For every dream that leads to a noble prize (as in the famous case of August Kekulé), numerous others lead nowhere and are quickly forgotten. In any case, most creative episodes do not happen in a moment, but require long periods of preparation (the equivalent of ten years of immersion in a subject is often cited).

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Emotions as Creative Products

This is the topic on which I focus the present discussion. By way of introduction, consider the following two observations, the first made near the beginning and the second near the end of the 20th century.

"When a person has an inborn genius for certain emotions, his life differs strangely from that of ordinary people, for none of their usual deterrents check him"(William James, 1902, p. 215).

"There are 'cognitive virtuosos' . . . but there are no 'emotional prodigies.' We can speak of an 'intellectual giant' but an 'emotional giant' is an absurdity" (Robert Zajonc, 1998, p. 597).

Given that this is a conference on creativity and innovation, it is no surprise that I favor the observation by James. I take it for granted that "genius" implies creativity. (The reverse, however, is not true: Many people can be creative without being recognized as geniuses.) In his book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, from which the above quote is taken, James (1902) gave many examples of emotionally creative episodes, not just in the religious domain, but in what he called "susceptibility to wrath, the fighting temper," and also love, which he asserted could "carry one to crime"— an example, perhaps, of emotional creativity gone awry.

Nevertheless, most people would probably agree that Zajonc has the better argument. Everyone recognizes Einstein as a genius, and Beethoven and Picasso as giants in music and art. But an emotional genius? Names do not come readily to mind. Even our ordinary language seems to favor Zajonc. Colloquially, emotions are often described as "thoughtless," "impulsive," "immature," "rigid," "gut" reactions. Such descriptors are seldom applied to creativity, which is typically ranked among the highest of the "higher" thought processes. Thus, the idea of an emotional genius does indeed seem to be an absurdity. That being the case, why do I believe James's observation to be closer to the truth?

Before addressing this question, I should be clear what I mean by "emotion." The term "emotion" covers a broad range of phenomena. No single account will fit all instances. My concern is with "standard" emotions, that is, those recognized and named in ordinary language, such as anger, love, fear, grief, and the like. Depending on the culture, standard emotions can range in number from a few to the hundreds.

By what criteria do we judge an emotional response as creative? Novelty and effectiveness (i.e., value) are the two most widely mentioned criteria for evaluating any

response, emotional or otherwise, as creative. They hardly need further discussion. To these, I want suggest a third criterion, namely, authenticity.

Whatever else it entails, authenticity implies that a response is consistent with a person's goals and values. But more than that: as a criterion for creativity, an authentic response involves, in the words of Arnheim (1966), "the pregnant sight of reality" (p. 299). This contrasts with novelty which, again in the words of Arnheim, may simply involve a "desire to get away from what is normal and ordinary for the purpose of being different." Put otherwise, if less eloquently, a creative response leaves room for further growth and development, whereas novelty may simply reflect an escape mechanism. A similar theme is voiced by Jodelet (2008), when she says that the term "beautiful" (which she applies to creativity of all kinds) "must be reserved for an idea that can lead to the discovery of more ideas, and for an invention that is fruitful to future generations" (p. 411)

Authenticity is relevant to creativity in any domain, but it is particularly important with respect to emotional creativity. Intense emotional reactions are often taken as ipso facto authentic. For this reason, emotional responses tend to give added credence to almost any experience, from the possible but unlikely (e.g., recollections of previously "forgotten" episodes of childhood sexual abuse) to the outright implausible (e.g., sexual experimentation by aliens while held captive on a space ship). Such experiences may be novel and even effective (at least in the short term, by giving meaning to a stressful experience occurring in the present); but would we judge them creative? Probably not, for they do not reflect the person's best interests or fundamental values, and they short-circuit rather than encourage fruitful development. (For a thorough discussion of authenticity as it applies to emotions, see Salmela, 2005).

Authenticity is important for another reason, namely, it helps account for cultural differences in judgments of creativity. In the West, with its emphasis on individuality, an authentic response also tends to be idiosyncratic to the individual and hence novel; in East Asian cultures, by contrast, where identification with the collective and its traditions is prized over individualism, authenticity is more easily distinguished from novelty (Averill, Chon, & Haan; 2001; Sundararajan & Averill, 2007).

Supporting Evidence

Support for emotional creativity stems from two main sources: Theoretical background and empirical data.

Theoretical Background

Emotional creativity is a straightforward inference from a social-constructionist view of emotion (Averill, 1980, 2005). That view rests on three fundamental assumptions: (1) Emotions are syndromes, comprising behavioral, physiological, and experiential (feelings) components; (2) No single component or type of response is essential to the whole; and (3) Social norms (beliefs and rules) are the main organizing principles that lend emotional syndromes their coherence.

The first two of these assumptions are now widely accepted. The third, is more controversial, for it seems to overlook the importance of biological and psychological factors in the development of emotions. But that is not the case. Biological (genetic) factors are important organizing influences, on some emotions (e.g., sudden fright) more than others (e.g., righteous anger). Through epigenetic mechanisms societies can influence emotional development even at the most elementary (subcortical) levels (Mason & Capitanio, 2012). Individual experience adds another level of complexity (J. Russell, 2003). In the final analysis, however, if an emotion is to be effective, it must involve socially shared principles of organization.

If we accept the three assumptions mentioned underlying social constructionism (i.e., emotions are complex syndromes, no one component of which is essential to the whole, with social norms providing the primary — though not exclusive — organizing principles), the possibility for emotional creativity follows logically. *What societies construct, individuals can reconstruct.* If the reconstruction meets the criteria of novelty, effectiveness, and authenticity, it can be considered creative. It is that simple. Simplicity, however, can be deceiving. Is there any evidence for emotional creativity beyond logical argument and the kind of anecdotal reports discussed by James?.

Empirical Data

Not everyone can be expected to be equally creative in the emotional any more than in the intellectual and artistic domains. One way to explore emotional creativity is, then, by examining the correlates of individual differences. To this end, an Emotional Creativity Inventory (ECI) has been constructed (Averill, 1999; Averill & Thomas-Knowles, 1991). The latest version of the ECI includes 30 items, 7 of which are related to emotional preparedness (e.g., “When I have strong emotional reactions, I search for the reasons for my feelings”; 14 to novelty (e.g., “I have emotional experiences that would be considered unusual or out of the ordinary”; 5 to effectiveness (e.g., “My emotions help me achieve my goals in life”; and 4 to authenticity (e.g., “My emotions are almost always an authentic expression of my true

thoughts and feelings”). Factor analyses suggest that the preparedness items form one facet; the novelty items, another facet; and the effectiveness and authenticity items, a third facet.

Personality correlates. Scores on the ECI are associated in a predictable manner with a variety of other personality variables. Among the “Big Five” personality dimensions, for example, the ECI is significantly correlated with Openness to Experience ($r[147] = .57$) and Agreeableness ($r[147] = .20$), but not with Neuroticism, Extraversion, or Conscientiousness, as measured by the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985). People who score high on the ECI are more prone to mystic-like experiences (e.g, transcendence of space and time, the loss of ego boundaries, and a sense that all things are alive), as measured by Hood’s (1975) scale ($r[89] = .46$). Self-confidence should facilitate receptivity to unusual experiences; not surprisingly, therefore, a modest correlation exists between the ECI and Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale ($r[87] = .25$). Finally, a negative relation exists between the ECI and alexithymia ($r[87] = -.35$), as measured by the TAS-20 (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). These correlations are for the total scores on the ECI; the pattern of relations differ somewhat when the preparedness, novelty, and effectiveness-authenticity facets are considered separately.

Emotional creativity, as measured by the ECI, is not related to cognitive intelligence, as reflected in Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores (Averill, 1999), nor to emotional intelligence, as measured by the *Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test* (MSCEIT).

Like traditional intelligence (IQ) tests, the MSCEIT contains mini-problems to be solved, such as identifying a facial expression. A response is considered correct if it matches the responses made by the majority of persons who have taken the test, or by a smaller group of presumed experts. Such “consensus scoring” tends to devalue unusual and idiosyncratic emotional responses. In this respect, the MSCEIT, again like most IQ tests, is a measure of convergent rather than divergent intelligence.

A study by Ivcevic, Brackett, & Mayer, (2005) compared emotional creativity and emotional intelligence using a variety of measures, including the ECI and the MSCEIT. Intercorrelations and confirmatory factor analyses suggest that emotional creativity and emotional intelligence are independent abilities, at least in terms of the measures used. Moreover, the ECI was a better predictor of creative writing and artistic activities than was the MSCEIT. This is consistent with the notion that the MSCEIT is a measure of convergent rather than divergent emotional intelligence.

On the other hand, Fuchs, Kumar, and Porter (2007) found that scores on the ECI loaded on a general creativity factor together with self-report measures of cognitive creativity. To some extent, this may reflect common method variance — all measures involved self-reports. However, it also makes theoretical sense. Cognitive processes are involved at all

stages of an emotional episode, from initial appraisals to the organization of responses. It would not be possible to be creative emotionally without some degree of cognitive creativity (Averill, 2007).

Behavioral correlates. People who score high on the ECI are rated by their peers as emotionally more creative than are low scorers, presumably on the basis of their everyday behavior (Averill, 1999). In the laboratory, they are also better able to express unusual emotions symbolically in words and pictures (Gutbezahl & Averill, 1996).

Needless to say, the ability to express emotions symbolically in words and pictures is not necessarily an indication of emotional creativity; a large gap often exists between what a person says and what a person does. A brief digression on the relation between poetry and emotion may indicate how that gap might be bridged.

Wordsworth (1805/1952) described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (p. 84). Wordsworth’s concern was to distinguish poetry from scientific discoveries, the former having to do with feelings and the latter with facts. Inspired by Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill (1833/1981) took the issue a step further, distinguishing poetry from other forms of literature and, incidentally, from music and art.

Mill considered poetry as a way of educating and expanding the emotions; in other words, as ways of being emotionally creative. This is important, he believed, because emotions, especially sympathy, are the bedrock on which a good society rests.

Mill (1833/1981) began his analysis of poetry by noting that people who “are perpetually engaged in hunting for excitement from without, are invariably those who do not possess, either in the vigor of their intellectual powers or in the depth of their sensibilities, that which would enable them to find ample excitement nearer home [i.e., from within].” That is an exaggeration, surely, and unnecessarily pejorative. Nevertheless, let us follow Mill’s line of argument, for it leads to some relevant conclusions concerning emotional creativity. Most literature (e.g., prose, drama, and rhetoric, no matter how eloquent) may also afford emotional excitement, Mill conceded, but also “of the kind that comes from without.” Poetry is different: Its object is “to paint the human soul truly.” “Great poets,” Mill asserted, “are often proverbially ignorant of life. What they know has come by observation of themselves: “they have found within them one highly delicate and sensitive specimen of human nature, on which the laws of emotion are written in large characters.” It follows, Mill concluded, that poetry “is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation,” not of active engagement in external affairs. Consistent with this last observation, Long, Seburn, Averill, and More (2003) found emotionally creative persons as measured by the ECI are better able than others to derive benefits from solitude.

What should we conclude from this brief digression on the relation between poetry and action. Certainly not that we should all become poets. (Mill was not, although he was one of the major 19th century British philosophers.) In fact, poetry is not even the issue. Rather, the issue is the source of a person's "excitement" (to borrow Mill's term). Emotional creativity presumes a rich inner life, and a willingness to explore and learn from it (cf. the preparedness items of the ECI). Of course, one's inner discoveries should find expression when conditions warrant; under ordinary conditions, however, emotionally creative responses may be more the exception than the rule.

Some Obstacles to Emotional Creativity.

This week we celebrate the many contributions made by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to our understanding of creativity. By way of background, therefore, let me refer briefly to Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) systems approach. Csikszentmihalyi points out that judgments of creativity are not based on individual achievement alone, but also depend on the domain and field of endeavor. The distinction between the domain and the field corresponds roughly to the distinction between culture and society, for example, as adumbrated by Kroeber and Parsons (1958). The *domain* of emotion is the cultural background, the network of stable ideas and customs that preserve and transmit ideas from one generation to another. The *field*, as Csikszentmihalyi (1988) conceives of it, is the set of social institutions that selects novel ideas that seem worth preserving as part of the domain. The field of emotion involves professional organizations, funding agencies, journal editors, and academic departments, to mention a few of the more prominent "gate keepers."

With Csikszentmihalyi's distinction in mind, we may call the one type of obstacle to emotional creativity, *domain antipathy*, and another type, *field impediments*. I will focus on the former. The nature of field impediments needs little explanation, although their influence may be subtle and vary over time. At present, few impediments to research and publication on emotion seem to exist. After a period of relative drought, which lasted most of the 20th century, the past decade has seen an outpouring of books, journals, and conferences on emotion. The domain of emotion, by contrast, has not changed as rapidly as the field; hence, our focus on the former.

Domain Antipathy

Let us return for a moment to Zajonc's (1998) observation that is absurd to speak of emotional prodigies. "Absurdity" is a strong word; it seems to point toward something deeper or more fundamental than a simple mistake or misunderstanding. Perhaps we should not

interpret Zajonc literally. But whether meant literally or not, his contention echoes a long-standing theme in Western culture. It deserves to be taken seriously.

An important feature of the emotional domain is its link to cultural values. Emotions are related to values in two ways. First, emotional arousal typically involves a value judgment, an appraisal that something is good or bad, right or wrong, beneficial or harmful. Second, emotions themselves are targets of value judgments. As Aristotle put it, and many others have followed, virtue is the ability to experience the right emotion in the right way, toward the right person, on the right occasion, and with the right motive. Vice is the opposite.

Creativity in any domain is liable to be met with resistance, at least initially. That is particularly so in the case of emotional creativity. An emotionally creative response may call into question deeply held values. To call it absurd is among the milder rebukes.

Illustrations are not difficult to find, as indicated by current controversies over the extension of love, and the privileges it entails, to same-sex couples, or to more than one partner at the same time. This controversy is hardly new. In 1940, Bertrand Russell was appointed professor at the City College of New York. After a public outcry over his political and social views, particularly his views on free love and marriage, the appointment was annulled by court order. This seems to confirm an earlier observation by Russell (1930/1958) that "Caution is enjoined both in the name of morality and in the name of worldly wisdom, with the result that generosity and adventurousness are discouraged where the affections are concerned (p. 185).

I am not suggesting that Zajonc, when he claimed that the idea of an "emotional giant" is absurd, was attempting to discourage "generosity and adventurousness . . . where affections are concerned." I do not believe that for a moment. However, I do believe his charge reflects a deeply held strain in Western culture.

Some Theoretical and Practical Implications

Why is emotional creativity worth considering in a conference devoted largely to innovation in artistic and technical fields? The reasons are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the idea of emotional creativity goes counter to all kinds of preformism (i.e., the notion that emotions are determined beforehand, either through biological evolution or socialization). Let me first say a few words about biological determinism. According to what is sometimes called "basic-emotion theory," beneath a patina laid down by culture, there exist basic emotions that are uncorrupted by social norms.

I have no objection to the idea of basic emotions, only to the contention that what makes an emotion basic is its biological origins. "Basicness" is a feature of any hierarchically organized system of classification, where some levels of organization are more fundamental

(information rich) than levels higher or lower in the hierarchy. To say that some emotions are more basic than others says something about our folk-taxonomies of emotion, not about the origins of emotions, biological or otherwise.

I emphasize this point because the idea of basic emotions as biologically determined, and hence invariant across individuals and cultures, has had a subtle but profound influence on research and theory. Few “basic scientists” want to investigate phenomena that are not also considered “basic.” This has restricted both the range and types of emotions investigated. It is time, I believe, for basic-emotion theory in affective science to go the way of phlogiston theory in chemistry.

Emotional creativity also has implications for psychological and sociological theories of emotion. Psychologically, it encourages us to look at emotional development as a life-long process, and not as something completed during infancy and childhood (Averill, 1984). Sociologically, emotional creativity offers a principled account of how cultural differences in emotions arise. The social norms that help organize emotional syndromes are not all embracing. Ample latitude exists for improvisation during specific episodes, depending on the individual and the situation. Emotional improvisations, as they accumulate and diffuse through society, ultimately result in emotional syndromes that are specific to a culture and that help differentiate one culture from another.

Turning to more practical concerns, Dr. Elma Nunley, a clinical colleague, and I have explored the relevance of emotional creativity in the treatment of emotional disorders (Averill & Nunley, 1992; 2010; Nunley & Averill, 1996). Whether in individual psychotherapy or group workshops, emotional creativity can be arduous. Like creativity in other domains, preparation is necessary. As people learn to attend to their own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, they are often surprised, not only at the way they respond emotionally, but also at the degree of control they have over their emotions. Also, as discussed earlier, emotions are inextricably linked to a person's sense of self and widely held cultural values; at some point in the therapeutic process, therefore, emotional innovation is likely to meet with stricture in the form of self-recrimination and/or social sanctions. A good deal of perseverance is thus necessary. Perhaps the most important prerequisite for emotional creativity is practice, practice, and more practice. Through imagery, observation, direct participation, and self-reflection people can learn to respond emotionally in different, more effective and authentic ways.

Emotional creativity can also play an important role in organizations. Sandelands and Buckner (1989) argue that work, at its best, can be viewed as an aesthetic experience. I doubt that many workers in the typical office or assembly line regard their activities as aesthetic. Yet, Sandelands and Buckner make an important point: Work can be aesthetic. For that to happen, certain conditions must be met. For example, there must be certain

tension in the work, as when challenges match capabilities (cf. Csikszentmihalyi's, 1990, concept of "flow"), and there must be opportunities for growth.

Sandelands and Buckner (1989) speculate that an aesthetic attitude toward work is reflected positively in such personality attributes as "playfulness, creativity, sense of humor, ego-strength, and self-actualization and negatively in the case of dogmatism, authoritarianism, and self-consciousness" (p. 125). These characteristics correspond well with the correlates of the emotionally creative individual as measured by the ECI (see earlier discussion). But a creative attitude is not just a matter of personal predispositions; it also depends on the work environment. And here we find an interesting paradox.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has found that people are more likely to report experiences of flow (one manifestation of a creative attitude) during work than during leisure activities; yet, most people still prefer leisure to work. In an attempt to resolve this paradox, Csikszentmihalyi postulates that people "disregard the quality of immediate experience, and base their motivation instead on the strongly rooted cultural stereotype of what work is *supposed* to be like. They think of it as an imposition, a constraint, and infringement of their freedom, and therefore something to be avoided as much as possible" (p. 160). In other words, the concept of work has accrued a negative connotation in spite of the pleasurable experiences people often have while working.

How might the negative attitude toward work be changed to one that is more aesthetic? Altering the work environment might be a start. Perhaps organizations should hire artists and poets as consultants, as well as accountants and engineers. An emphasis on the aesthetic would complement, not replace, more traditional concerns regarding productivity, quality control, and the "bottom line." The aesthetic and the practical are not antithetical, but mutually reinforcing.

Concluding Observation

It is often said that recognition of a problem is more critical than discovering the solution. Asking the right question is, at least, a necessary beginning. I believe one the greatest obstacles to emotional creativity is simply the belief that it cannot occur, that even the idea is "absurd.." I hope that I have been able to convince you of the opposite. Many of the problems we face in our interpersonal relations and business practices are not subject to a technological solution. Put bluntly, our future well-being depends as much on our emotional as on our technological creativity.

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