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The Two Social Psychologies of Creativity: From Historiometric to Experimental (and the Latter to Stay)

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Teresa Amabile and I faced a similar problem when each of us entered our respective graduate programs in social psychology, I at Harvard in 1970 and she at Stanford in 1972. That problem was simply that we both wanted to study creativity when that subject was not then a recognized research topic in the subdiscipline. For example, the textbook assigned in my introductory social psychology course in college didn't even include "creativity" as an index entry (viz. Brown, 1965). In contrast, creativity was then considered a bona fide area in introductory psychology texts, including the one that I had studied in my sophomore year (viz. Hilgard & Atkinson, 1967). Yet it was then considered to belong to subdisciplines like educational, personality, and cognitive psychology—but definitely not social psychology.

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Even so, I was somewhat more fortunate than Amabile insofar as my social psychology program was housed in the Department of Social Relations, which included sociology and cultural anthropology as well as personality and developmental psychology. Even though the department broke apart shortly after I entered the program, the faculty remained more open to alternative perspectives and methods than might hold in a more mainstream social psychology program. It also helped me that Harvard's program hired a brand new assistant professor, David A. Kenny, who was very open to new methodologies, having been the doctoral student of the eminent social psychologist Donald Campbell, a major proponent of quasi-experimental designs (e.g., Campbell, 1969). In fact, Kenny's supreme openness to methodological innovations much later led to his receiving the 2019 Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award from the American Psychological Association.

In any event, I managed to convince Kenny to chair my dissertation, resulting in a thesis entitled "The Social Psychology of Creativity: An Archival Data Analysis" (Simonton, 1974). Despite the fact that I was warned that my research was unpublishable in top-tier journals, I decided to submit a revised version of the core chapter to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (*JPSP*), then viewed as the premier journal in the field (see Simonton, 2002). Contrary to the warnings, the manuscript was accepted, pending the usual revise and resubmit (Simonton, 1975). Indeed, the responses from both editors and referees were surprisingly appreciative, apparently welcoming research that departed so dramatically from the mainstream. A few years later one of my *JPSP* submissions was even accepted without any requests for revisions from any of the reviewers, the editor even telling me that he had never seen that before—nor have I since! Admittedly, it was partly a matter of being at the right place at the right time, for social psychology back then was undergoing a "crisis of confidence" (Elms, 1975), a discontent even expressed by *JPSP*'s editor shortly before I began my career (McGuire, 1973). The feeling was widespread back then that the subdiscipline was stagnating, and thus overdue for an infusion of new topics and techniques.

By the time that my work started appearing, Amabile was formulating her research ideas within a much more traditional social psychology program. As she reported,

When I told my graduate advisors that I wanted to research in the social psychology of creativity, they informed me that there was no such thing. But, just weeks after that conversation, I opened the new *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* to find an article by Dean Simonton (1975) with the phrase “social psychology of creativity” splashed boldly about. That was all the encouragement I needed. (Amabile, 1990, p. 64)

The aftermath is well-known to everybody participating in this Festschrift: She made a big name for herself publishing research in the social psychology of creativity. But I want to go a step further by arguing that she, not I, deserves all of the credit for establishing creativity as a genuine topic within social psychology. To be sure, judging from database searches using PsycINFO and Google Scholar, I seem to have been the first to invent the expression “social psychology of creativity.” Yet those words are only found in the main title of my 1974 dissertation. I never once repeated that title in any of my publications. Even my central thesis results were published under the title “Sociocultural Context of Individual Creativity: A Transhistorical Time-Series Analysis” (Simonton, 1975). Moreover, not a single one of my own graduate students ever used those words in any of their published titles either (cf. Ting, 1986). Indeed, “sociocultural context” came to replace “social psychology” (see also Glăveanu et al., 2020).

All this stands in striking contrast to Amabile’s claim on the phrase. First of all, she actually used “social psychology of creativity” in the main titles of major publications, starting with her *JPSP* article on the consensual assessment technique (Amabile, 1982) and then continuing with her very first book a year later (Amabile, 1983; see also Amabile, 1996). Better yet, she even succeeded in getting at least one graduate student to incorporate this expression in main title (e.g., Hennessey, 2003). Yet most importantly, her methods were more compatible with mainstream social psychology, which remains strongly orientated toward laboratory experiments. Contemporary researchers who claim to be doing the social psychology of creativity are in fact experimentalists, even if testing hypotheses far removed from Amabile’s research program (Damian & Simonton, 2015). By comparison, the bulk of my empirical research on creativity has been strictly historiometric in character (Simonton, 2019a,

2019b). As in my doctoral dissertation, historical and biographical data are collected on hundreds, even thousands of creative geniuses, and then nomothetic hypotheses are tested by subjecting those data to objective quantification and statistical analyzes.

Amabile (1983) herself recognized early on that the two social psychologies are hardly the same, even when overtly addressing the same general phenomenon. She gave the example of the relation between social reinforcement and creativity, where I found no association whereas she “found that the relationship is sometimes positive and sometimes negative” (p. 176). She then provides three stark differences between her and my research programs: (a) there’s little overlap between the independent variables investigated; (b) the independent variables are examined across rather contrasting time periods; and (c) the operational definitions of the dependent variable, creativity, are vastly divergent. It’s like in the biomedical sciences where *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies do not necessarily yield the same outcomes.

To be sure, Amabile has by no means confined her research to laboratory experiments (e.g., Amabile & Kramer, 2011), and I myself must admit to conducting experimental research from time to time (e.g., Ritter et al., 2012; cf. Simonton, 1986). Yet when every consideration is given its proper weight, I believe that she, not me, should be identified as the true founder of the social psychology of creativity. I’m no more than a precursor.

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