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Paradigms in the study of creativity: introducing the perspective of cultural psychology

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Paradigms in the study of creativity: Introducing the perspective of cultural psychology

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This article identifies three paradigms in creativity theory and research in psychology. The He-paradigm, focused on the solitary genius, has been followed, mainly after the 1950s, by the I-paradigm, equally individualistic in nature but attributing creativity to each and every individual. Extending this view, the We-paradigm incorporates what became known as the social psychology of creativity. The cultural psychology of creativity builds upon this last theoretical approach while being critical of some of its assumptions. This relatively new perspective, using the conceptual and methodological framework of cultural psychology, investigates the sociocultural roots and dynamics of all our creative acts and employs a tetradic framework of self – community – new artifact – existing artifacts in its conceptualization of creativity. The theoretical basis of the cultural psychology approach is analyzed as well as some of its main implications for both the understanding and study of creativity.

Keywords: He I and We-paradigms, Social psychology of creativity, Cultural psychology of creativity, Vygotskian approach, Potential space, Dialogicality, Symbolic resources

We undoubtedly live in a world of change, a world in motion. It is change that takes place at all levels, that seems to get hold of every aspect of our life and our society. We feel it in the accelerated daily rhythm at work and at home, we perceive its consequences in the political and economical domain and see its impact for the natural environment. This generalized sense of change often leads to anxiety (Negus & Pickering, 2004), to the feeling that we are not "prepared", that what we normally know and do doesn't work anymore. It is under these circumstances that creativity becomes much more present and more important that before (Runco, 2004) and it is claimed to help us achieve our goals as individuals, as organizations, as societies (Westwood & Low, 2003). At the same time, the aura of panacea creativity has gained pushes it more than ever under the scrutiny of psychologists and social scientists at large.

The number of ways in which creativity has been theorized and the variety of *domains* it has been applied to is impressive (for reviews see Sternberg, 2003; Runco, 2004): from behavioral approaches linking it to reinforcement and modeling (Epstein & Laptosky, 1999) to the dominant cognitive approaches discussing it in terms of cognitive style (Martinsen & Kaufmann, 1999) or problem solving (Weisberg, 1988). Primary areas of application for creativity theories are in educational settings (Cropley, 1999; Hennessey, 2003a) and organizations, especially studies of leadership (Mumford & Connelly, 1999) and performance in heterogeneous teams (Puccio, 1999).

In most of these areas it is the individual set apart from his/her social context that constitutes the unit of analysis for creativity, an authentic bias in the literature recognized only from the '70s on (Hennessey, 2003b). Be it the "lone genius" or the more "ordinary" person, s/he creates *outside* of social and group factors (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003) and even *despite* them (Weiner, 2000). Society and culture repeatedly act as the "villains" the creator fights against and this generates a series of paradoxes that will be exposed further on in this article. One of them relates directly to the definition of creativity. "New" and "useful" as features of a creative product (Stein, 1953; Martindale, 1994; Richards, 1999) are properties that easily describe the work of great creators and can be applied to certain products, particularly in the field of science, art and technology, but deny the creativity of children and the varied instances of "mundane creativity" (Cohen & Ambrose, 1999).

This article aims to unpack the social and cultural nature of creative acts. In doing so I will start by distinguishing between three paradigms that led creativity theory and research, the *He, I* and *We paradigm* (see also Glăveanu, in press). The first part will therefore focus on paradigmatic shifts from "positivistic research paradigms to more complex, constructivistic, systems-oriented research models" (Friedman & Rogers, 1998, p. xviii). Nonetheless, it will be argued that even the models proposed within what is currently considered the social psychology of creativity, maybe "the least developed area in creativity research" (Amabile, 1996, p. 264), can still be criticized for the individualism hidden behind their assumptions. Counteracting such tendencies, an emerging multidisciplinary field is introduced, *the cultural psychology of creativity*, conceiving creativity as a fundamentally relational, intersubjective phenomenon.

1. Three paradigms of creativity theory and research

The study of creativity has known three paradigmatic stages: the genius stage, the creative person stage and the "social" stage. By making reference to historical times long before the words "creativeness" or "creativity" entered our vocabulary (for the English language this is the 18th and 19th century respectively; see Mason, 2003; Weiner, 2000) or before psychology became a science, the article will also consider centuries of pre-psychological thought concerning humans' capacity to create. Although a historical progression is implied, it is likely that "instances" of these paradigms coexist at different times and they are certainly intertwined in today's scientific landscape.

1.1. The He-paradigm: the lone genius

The image of the genius is probably one of the most persistent representations in human history. With roots in Greek and Roman antiquity, the first links to be made were those between genius and *divine inspiration* (Friedman & Rogers, 1998; Sternberg, 2003). Yet, the Latin origins and meaning of genius as a guardian spirit have changed in the following centuries (Negus & Pickering, 2004). One turning point is considered by most to be the Renaissance (Montuori & Purser, 1995), when the influence of God started to be replaced by that of *genetic inheritance* (Dacey, 1999). This process of individualization of the genius continued on two different fronts: arts and the exaltation of

imagination during Romanticism and sciences and the exaltation of reason during Enlightenment (Weiner, 2000). Embracing such ideas about unique individuals, the He-paradigm, or the paradigm of the genius, has put considerable emphasis in describing creators on two main features: *exclusivity and disconnection*. Creativity is from this perspective "exclusivist" because only few are chosen for it (initially by God, later on by their biology), and the very few that are must, as a prerequisite, stand apart from the masses because of their capacities. They create *ex-nihilo* (Negus & Pickering, 2004) and therefore need nothing to tie them up to the world of others or existing knowledge. The He-paradigm, ("He" since the creator is most often a *male other*), thus takes the strongest individualistic stance in the conceptualization of creativity.

Undoubtedly the father-figure of the "modern" He-paradigm, Francis Galton offered the world through his 1869 "Hereditary Genius" the first scientific study of the creative genius (Simonton, 2003). His assumption was that in the "competition between nature and nurture", when all conditions are equal, "nature certainly proves the stronger of the two" (Galton, 1874, p. 16). By this Galton took genius out of the mists of the supernatural and gave it a solid basis: human biology. He also described it in terms of intellectual ability and eminence (Terman, 1947/1970). While intellectual ability has to do with the creator's individual brain, there is a factor of social reputation in appreciating eminence. Nevertheless, the connection to the world of previous knowledge and the scientific (or artistic) communities is not understood here as interdependence but as the mere effect of the genius on the existing social and cultural structures. Therefore, creativity in this paradigm refers strictly to the highest levels of creation, or what is known as *historical creativity* (Boden, 1994; Fischer et al., 2005). The only things worthy of being called creative are those that introduce novelties, that generate new schools of thought, and constitute landmarks in the history of a domain, sometimes even the history of humanity.

This represents the main limitation but also the main attraction of the He-paradigm. By glorying creative breakthroughs it makes creativity stand among the most desirable human capacities, however at the price of cutting off ordinary creativity (Bateson, 1999) and common creative experiences (Stein, 1953). Its focus has traditionally been on the study of the *Great Man*, especially eminent scientists, and this branch of investigation has only grown in the last decades (although the emphasis on the biological basis of genius was not always kept). Examples are found in the work of Roe (1952/1970) who examined eminent US scientists to build an "average" profile of their characteristics. The studies of Gardner (1994) on seven "creators of the modern era", each taken as an embodiment of a certain types of intelligence, have led to similar descriptions of the psychological profile and life-path of *Exemplary Creators*. But researches on scientific genius soon started to be questioned for their implicit assumptions. In such a critical enterprise, Schaffer (1994) argued against the mythologies of the genius or what she calls the "culture hero" and the "fetishism" of discovery. Both scientific discoveries and their authors are "made up" or socially constructed by subsequent generations through processes of retrospection and celebration.

In concluding, the He-paradigm, based on the individuality, insight, outstanding ability and fertility of the genius (Mason, 2003), gives an *elitist and essentialist* account of creativity (Negus &

Pickering, 2004). The direct consequence of this is that it detaches the creator from community and, by this, ends up building a pathological image of him/her. As Montuori and Purser (1995, p. 76) argue, the fate of the genius is often represented as that of a person who is misunderstood, eccentric and even anti-social. Such an account also excludes the role of co-creation or collaboration in the process of reaching "great discoveries" (Barron, 1999). Its implications go above the scientific and also reach the *ideological* since recognizing or not the "genius" is often a highly politically-charged action (Negus & Pickering, 2004). In the end, it rarely is creativity alone that decides who is a genius but institutional structures reflecting power relations between and within social groups.

1.2. The I-paradigm: the creative person

If the He-paradigm has deep roots in pre-psychological thought, the I-paradigm largely emerged once psychologists started to focus on creativity. Put simply, the paradigmatic shift replaced the genius with the "normal" person while *keeping* the individual as a unit of analysis. It is what can be referred to as a "democratization" of creativity (Bilton, 2007; Hulbeck, 1945; Weiner, 2000). Everyone is capable of being creative since it is no longer a capacity of the few chosen by God, biology or unique psychological features. With this shift, the use of the term genius declined leaving space for notions like *gifted* and *creative* (Friedman & Rogers, 1998). The birth of the I-paradigm and its new terminology was affected by forces working from within the field of psychology and also from the outside: the socio-political context in the US after the Second World War.

> "In the presence of the Russian threat, 'creativity' could no longer be left to the chance occurrences of the genius; neither could it be left in the realm of the wholly mysterious and the untouchable. Men *had* to be able to do something about it; creativity *had* to be a property in many men; it *had* to be something identifiable; it *had* to be subject to the effects of efforts to gain more of it" (Razik, 1967/1970, p. 156).

It was the background of an individualistic society that gave the perfect context for the emergence of the I-paradigm. As shown by Slater (1991), the Individual versus Society worldview is predominant in America. This myth is associated with the dream of escaping the influence of the *outside* society and culture seen as entities one can connect to and disconnect from (p. 154).

In psychology the voice behind the I-paradigm was that of Guilford, remembered here for his historical APA presidential address in 1950. While calling the attention of psychologists to the topic of creativity, he also gave them a clear agenda: "the psychologist's problem is that of creative personality" (p. 444) and "creative acts can therefore be expected, no matter how feeble or how infrequent, of almost all individuals" (p. 446). And Guilford's message was heard; for the following decades psychologists looked intensively for the personal attributes of individuals (personality, intelligence, etc.) and their link to creativity (Amabile, 1996).

Unsurprisingly then, in 1981, when Barron and Harrington published a review of creativity studies, they offered it the title "Creativity, intelligence, and personality". More recent literature argues that *intelligence* is not a sufficient condition for creativity (Eysenck, 1994) and therefore intelligent persons are not necessarily creative as well. Nevertheless, intelligence and creativity overlap in some respects but not in others (Sternberg, 1999). One hypothesis may be that, instead of a single outstanding intelligence, the creative person is described by an unusual combination of intelligences (Gardner, 1994). Studies of the *creative personality* on the other hand proved to be an even more fertile tradition. Among the most common traits encountered were: tolerance for ambiguity and orientation towards the future (Stein, 1953), independence of judgment, preference for complexity, strong desire to create, deep motivation, lots of personal troubles, strong intuitive nature and patience (Barron, 1999), relatively high intelligence, originality, articulateness and verbal fluency, and a good imagination (Tardif & Sternberg, 1988). Finally, also within the I-paradigm, a special class of studies locates creativity not in the individual's personality but in his/her *unconscious* and acts of sublimation (see Freud, 1908/1970; Noppe, 1999), or even in *pathology* (see Storr, 1972; Eysenck, 1994; Richards, 1999). Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of the I-paradigm though can be found in *cognitive* studies looking at processes of "creative cognition" (see for example Ward et al., 1999). What all these diverse approaches have in common is their attempt to relate creativity to something from *within* the psychology of the person.

Along with advances in theoretical models, the I-paradigm was also fruitful for research methodology (see Mayor, 1999). *Psychometric* approaches flourished, most creativity tests being developed to measure divergent thinking and problem-solving abilities (Sternberg, 2003; Barron and Harrington, 1981). In the spirit of the I-paradigm, these tests were validated on and applied to non-eminent persons (Runco, 2004) but remained open to criticism since they looked at the end-product and not the creative process behind it (Barron & Harrington, 1981). Overall, taking into account both theory and research methods, it could be said that the I-paradigm largely encouraged *methodological reductionism* (Montuori & Purser, 1997) by focusing on intrapsychic processes to the exclusion of other levels. This generated partial theoretical models that explore individual cognition and personality in a social vacuum and conceptualize creativity as a quality of the lone individual. The critique of this decontextualized view led to the emergence of the We-paradigm.

1.3. The We-paradigm: towards a social psychology of creativity

Driven by an attributional error commonly described in psychology, both laypeople and researchers generally attribute creativity to creators' internal dispositions ignoring nondispositional influences (Kasof, 1999, p. 156). Several notable attempts have been made to correct this error in recent decades by initiating the first research programs to investigate the role of social factors in the creative process (Amabile, 1996). Along with these a new vocabulary emerged, one bringing to the front terms such as *social creativity*, the creativity that is the result of human interaction and collaboration (Purser & Montuori, 2000), and showing a renewed interest in *group creativity* (Paulus et al., 1999; Nemeth at al., 2003; Paulus & Nijstad, 2003). In short, the We-paradigm

ambitiously aims to "put the social back" (Hennessey, 2003a, p. 184) into the theory of creativity and starts from the assumption that "creativity takes place within, is constituted and influenced by, and has consequences for, a social context" (Westwood & Low, 2003, p. 236). Rejecting atomistic and positivistic standpoints and adopting *more holistic and systemic ways* of looking at creativity, the psychologists promoting the We-paradigm acknowledge the social nature of creativity (Purser & Montuori, 2000), a process that spurs out of transactions between self and others, self and environment (Stein, 1975).

However, although formally the social psychology of creativity has been proposed as such by Teresa Amabile since the beginning of the '80s, much of the work done within it still endorses a vision of the social that corresponds more to individualistic paradigms than to a truly social perspective. In making this claim I rely on Marková's (2003) discussion of external Ego-Alter relationships envisioning self and other, the individual and the social, as two distinct units. This kind of conceptualization, common to modern social psychology (Farr, 1996), ends up portraying the social as an *external environment*, a set of stimulations that facilitate or constrain the creative act (the "press" factor; Rhodes, 1961, cited in Runco, 2004), and therefore remains oblivious to the social roots, social dynamics and social functions of creativity.

For example, Amabile's social psychology of creativity grants social factors a "crucial role in creative performance" (1996, p. 6). In her extensive work she, along with collaborators, used a variety of methods to investigate the role of *intrinsic motivation* in creativity. Their conclusion, important for the psychology of creativity in general, is formalized as the Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity, and states that intrinsic motivation, or doing something for its own sake, is generally associated with increased creativity, while extrinsic motivation, or the motivation to do something for an external goal, often leads to a decrease in creative performance (Amabile, 1996; Hennessey, 2003a). The role of motivation is reflected in Amabile's *componential model* of creativity comprising domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant skills, and task motivation. Considering the above, a legitimate question arises: where is the social in this model? Disappointingly, the answer offered is that, "largely because they affect motivation, social factors can have a powerful impact on creativity" (Amabile, 1996, p. 3). This is in tone with the declared aim of Amabile's social psychology of creativity, "to identify particular social and environmental conditions that can positively or negatively influence the creativity of most individuals" (p. 5). Consequently, the discussion of the social in her book is constantly framed in terms of choice and constraints, reward, competition, modeling, stimulation, evaluation, peer pressure, surveillance, etc. and therefore does not abandon the understanding of creativity as an individual-level phenomenon "conditioned" by social factors.

Other accounts informing the social psychology of creativity depart from the study of the individual and focus on larger societal contexts. Using impressive collections of data about creative persons throughout history and quantifying aspects of the social world and the personal life of the creators, D.K. Simonton (1975, 1976, 1999) reached several interesting conclusions about the way in which social, cultural, political and economic factors impact on creativity. His ample and fertile research,

"the largest systematic program of research in the social psychology of creativity" (Amabile, 1996, p. 213), used *historiometry* as a nomothetic approach to creativity. Although appealing for the rigor of its procedures, this specific methodology greatly influences the choice and selection of subjects, as well as on the nature of the conclusions. Suitable for a historiometric analysis, Simonton (1988) focused on scientific geniuses and, more generally, on "great" creative achievements to the exclusion of more common forms of creativity (something specific to the He-paradigm). Furthermore, the nomothetic orientation aims to unravel general patterns and correlations between factors at the cost of understanding the individual circumstances of the creators.

From the two accounts above it becomes clear that what a social psychology of creativity would need is to be able to bring together both individuals and societal structures. Systemic models of creativity represent, from this perspective, perhaps the greatest achievements of the We-paradigm. A well-known example is offered by Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1999), who proposed the connection in the creative production between a *person* (with his/her genetic pool and personal experiences), a *field* (social system) and a *domain* (system of symbols, related to the idea of culture). Although it mainly pays attention to historical creativity rather than more common instances of the phenomenon, this model is nonetheless essential for a We-paradigm since, as an ecological and systemic approach, it "recognizes the interconnectedness between the self and the environment and attempts to discover relations between them" (Montuori & Purser, 1995, pp. 81-82). Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi (1988) repeatedly stressed the *contextual* and *generative* nature of creativity. This means that creativity is explicitly considered as embedded within a social and historical milieu and that every act of creation must start from and build upon the existing knowledge within a "domain". It is because of these qualities that systems approaches in general have a great appeal for psychologists involved in the study of creativity and we can now find a series of successful applications of these perspectives (e.g., the case of families of gifted children, Moon et al., 1998).

The systemic and ecological frameworks of the We-paradigm bring a series of advantages. First and foremost, they *contextualize* creative acts and give a more comprehensive account of how creativity takes place in all its complexity. Second, they are much better equipped to investigate *both* historical creativity (initially the He-paradigm) and everyday creativity (looked at by the I-paradigm). Third, on a practical note, they open a new world of opportunities for *influencing* creative behavior now conceptualized as less dependent on innate abilities and personality traits (Amabile, 1996). Despite these benefits, reactions against the We approach didn't take long to materialize. Analyzing the social ethos in much of today's literature on creativity, Runco (1999) fears it is *misleading* and that, in comparing social with individual factors, "it is the social factors that are not necessary for creativity" (p. 237). The author even proposes to separate creativity from reputation and therefore to cut the process from its context since this would eliminate the "social noise" affecting the inner (and "real") dynamic of creativity. Needless to say, this article is intended to show that the social does not "perturb" creativity but *allows* it since, without the social context, there would be no creativity. In the words of Csikszentmihalyi (1988, p. 336), we must go beyond the Ptolemaic view putting the person in the centre of creativity in favor of a Copernican model. This is also the aim of the newest development within the We-paradigm: the cultural psychology of creativity.

2. The emergence of a cultural psychology of creativity

As argued above, the "social" of the We-paradigm often fails to go beyond an external-influence model and to see how creativity takes place within relations. In other words, the We-paradigm has to rightfully acknowledge the *interdependence* between Ego and Alter (Marková, 2003, p. xiii) in the creative act. This is the starting point for one of the newest perspectives in the field: the cultural psychology approach to creativity (see also Glăveanu, 2008; in press). It must be said that this discipline doesn't aim to replace the social psychology of creativity but to build on its conclusions and to reveal "another side" of the We-paradigm: the social and cultural working from *within* the creative person and process. This is the contemporary retake of an old theme in creativity theory, what Arieti (1976) called the "individual-psychological versus the sociocultural origin of creativity" (p. 303). The cultural psychological position in this debate is that there is no versus between the two and, even more, that these two "segments" are not isolated but elements that *co-constitute* each other.

Before introducing in more detail a cultural psychology framework of creativity, I will briefly discuss the characteristics of cultural psychology and focus on reviewing some theories or concepts within this discipline that address or could address the problem of creativity.

2.1. Creativity and cultural psychology

Not only are cultural psychology perspectives on creativity relatively recent, but cultural (or sociocultural) psychology itself has only (re)taken shape in the last few decades and is now not a unified but an *emergent* field. Reacting to the search for inbuilt and universal processing mechanisms that took over general and cross-cultural psychology after the cognitive revolution, cultural psychology is, in the words of Shweder (1990), a study of how "cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche" (p. 1). To understand these processes, cultural psychologists start from the basic premise of the interdependence between human beings and their socio-cultural context. Therefore, the focus is not on the two as separate entities, but on the *transactions* that define both of them and generate a symbolic world (Zittoun, 2007b). This symbolic world spurs out of processes of meaning-making and co-construction of knowledge (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007) and this is why cultural psychology envisions human existence as essentially *mediated* through the system of symbols and norms that constitute culture. Consequently, the research focus in cultural psychology is on mediated action in context, on the sociocultural genesis of mental functions, and the analysis of everyday life (Cole, 1996, p. 104).

As a paradigm that examines systemic, interactive, and mediated phenomena (Zittoun et al., 2007, p. 208), cultural psychology developed a specific understanding of culture described as *a web of significance*, *an interworked system of construable signs*, not external power but *context* (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, these meanings and symbols "stick" through time (Jovchelovitch, 2007), they are preserved and transmitted to new generations offering our symbolic universe a certain degree of

stability. Simultaneously they are open to change, elaboration and transformation through collective processes of action and communication. Perspectives on culture that emphasize the construction and use of mediators are most easily integrated by cultural psychology, for example Michael Cole's (1996) understanding of culture as a *system of accumulated artifacts* of a group (p. 110). The artifact, at once material and conceptual in nature (with illustrations ranging from language to pottery), mediates the relation between subject and object and is a result of communication between self and other (persons, groups or societies).

In this context, creativity both relies on the accumulated artifacts and enriches culture through the generation of new artifacts. As such, creative processes should constitute a key point of interest for the discipline of cultural psychology. While there is so far no "formally" constructed cultural psychology of creativity, several sociocultural directions have recently inspired empirical research on collaborative creativity, resulting in books (see Littleton & Miell, 2004) and journal special issues (see Thinking Skills and Creativity journal, 3/2008). At a theoretical level, different traditions within cultural psychology can be built upon in constructing a cultural psychology of creativity and, from them, the cultural-historical Russian school, and especially the writings of Lev Vygotsky, are particularly relevant. As one of the father figures of cultural psychology, Vygotsky (1960/1997) pointed to the importance of cultural mediation through tools and signs for the development of all higher mental functions. Vygotsky's early work on imagination and creativity in childhood (1930/1998) laid the *foundations* for a cultural approach to creativity by asserting that: 1) creativity exists in the everyday and not only in great historical works, and 2) every creator is a product of his/her time and environment. What transpires from the cultural-historical perspective is that creators use culturally constructed symbols and tools to produce new cultural artifacts (see also Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Furthermore, Vygotsky was primarily interested in the ontogenesis and microgenesis of creativity and in creativity as a process occurring in real-life "collaborations" (like those between child and adult). It is because of these preoccupations that the Vygotskian perspective remains central to any cultural perspective on creativity and this includes the proposed framework to be discussed further in the article. This framework also combines ideas from several lines of thought, three of which are briefly presented below: Winnicott and the notion of potential space, dialogicality and creativity as dialogue, and the everyday use of symbolic resources.

Similar to Vygotsky, who proposed "that creative imagination develops from children's symbolic play interactions with caregivers" (Smolucha, 1992, p. 51), Donald Winnicott (1971) developed an important thesis claiming that creativity and cultural experience are *twinborn* in the *potential or transitional space* through creative playing in early childhood. The notion of potential space, central to the conception of the author, is that of a relational space "between the individual and the environment" (p. 100), a space of experiencing the world situated between inner self and external life, a notion that came to be equated with the area of intersubjectivity. Creativity therefore has a strong social basis as it *emerges primarily in a relationship*, that between the mother and the child. Besides establishing creativity as relational, Winnicott's account can be considered an excellent theoretization of everyday creativity in its most basic expression. For him, creativity is not

embodied in products but it is primarily a process, what he described as "creative living", a healthy way of living that leaves room for personal expression and spontaneity.

If Winnicott's account can give us an idea of *where* creativity is located, and that is in the space of interrelations, we further need to understand *how* exactly creativity emerges in relations and it is here where notions of dialogue and dialogicality become instrumental.

> "Dialogue is the meeting ground on which new questions are raised, the mating ground on which new combinations are found, and the testing ground in which novelties are critically evaluated and assimilated into the body of shared knowledge and thought" (Gruber, 1998, p. 139).

Continuing his argument, Gruber asserts that all creativity requires, at least at certain points in the process, some form of communication or social exchange. This is not only applicable to explicit moments of social interaction since for the cultural psychologist the human mind is *dialogical*, meaning that it can "conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the '*Alter*'" (Marková, 2003, p. xiii). The relevance of this perspective is supported by Barrett (1999) who recognized knowledge creation, therefore both thinking and creativity, as *inherently* social-dialogical processes. This means that, even when we are alone and apparently creating in complete solitude, we are still engaged in dialogue with internalized "parties" such as our mentors, our audience, our critics, etc. In the words of Negus and Pickering (2004, p. 23), creativity entails a communicative experience, intersubjectivity and interactive dialogue. This dialogue is made possible by the use of cultural elements and it is these elements that constitute the substance of our creative acts. The question remains of *when* we are more likely to use cultural elements in a creative manner.

This leads us, finally, to the notion of *symbolic resources* as developed by T. Zittoun (2007a; 2007b). The main thesis of this conception is that whenever people find themselves facing a discontinuity, a break or rupture of their taken-for-granted ordinary experience (of their inner self, of the relations with others or the environment), they engage in processes specific to "*transitions*" and resort to symbolic resources to elaborate meaning and externalize the outcome (Zittoun et al., 2003; Zittoun, 2007b). Needless to say this outcome (not necessarily material) is most often creative, especially since it comes out of a situation where there is no learned or practiced solution (Torrance, 1988). To qualify as a symbolic resource, the element must be used by someone for something, usually re-contextualizing meaning into a newly resulting socio-cultural formation (Zittoun et al., 2003, p. 418). Symbolic resources vary in nature, from concrete artifacts to conceptual and procedural elements. All symbolic resources emerge from social interaction (Zittoun, 2007a) and require a symbolic labor, the necessary work in the terms of Willis (1990, p. 9) "to ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence".

From the perspectives outlined above, some conclusions can be drawn about the cultural psychology conceptualization of creativity: 1) *it considers creative acts as socio-cultural in nature and origin*;

2) *it stresses the role of intersubjectivity and dialogical interaction in the creative expression* and 3) *it looks at how cultural symbolic elements come to form the texture of new and creative products*. All these basic premises are therefore at the core of the creativity framework discussed in the next section.

2.2. A cultural psychology framework for creativity and its implications

2.2.1. Definition and theoretical framework

As mentioned earlier, until now no "cultural psychology of creativity" has been formally constructed as such. Reviewed before were nonetheless important theoretical leads that could support such a construction. A *cultural definition of creativity* would need to take into account the social embedment of creative acts as well as their relation to cultural resources. In the literature on creativity some of these features tend to appear in a number of definitions:

> "a creative individual solves problems, fashions products, or poses new questions within a domain in a way that is initially considered to be unusual but is eventually accepted within at least one cultural group" (Gardner, 1994, p. 145).

> "I define creativity as activity that produces something new through the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices or forms" (Liep, 2001, p. 2).

> "Much human creativity is social, arising from activities that take place in a context in which interaction with other people and the artifacts that embody collective knowledge are essential contributors" (Fischer et al., 2005, p. 482).

Supported by these formulations, I will define creativity from a cultural perspective as *a complex socio-cultural-psychological process that, through working with "culturally-impregnated" materials within an intersubjective space, leads to the generation of artifacts that are evaluated as new and significant by one or more persons or communities at a given time*. As seen from before, the socio-cultural-psychological process is a dialogical one, the "culturally-impregnated" materials are symbolic resources (signs and tools from a Vygotskian perspective) used in creative acts, and the intersubjective space is a potential space, between creator and community. Adopting this definition opens up a new world of possibilities for studying creativity without individualizing it or looking exclusively at its cognitive aspects. In fact, the cultural psychology of creativity as proposed here "puts" creativity into a *tetradic framework* depicted in Figure 1:

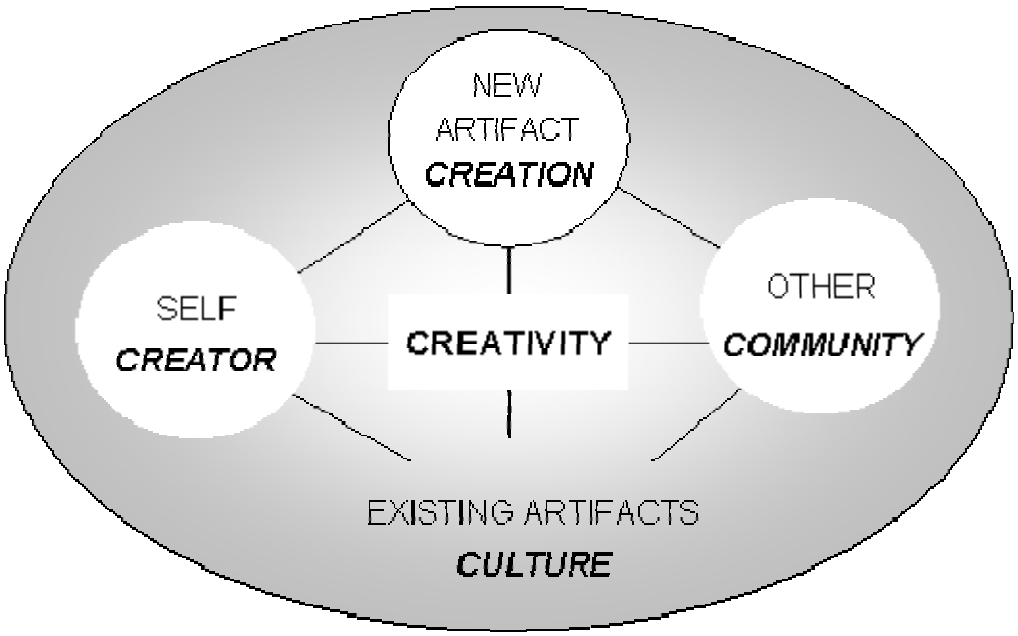

FIGURE 1. A proposed cultural framework of creativity

In this framework, the *new artifact* (material or conceptual) is seen as emerging within the relation between *self* (creator) and *others* (broadly understood as a *community*), all three being immersed into and in dialogue with an existing body of *cultural artifacts, symbols and established norms*. This model is not structural but *dynamic* since it is in the "tensions" between all four elements that creativity takes shape with the "new artifact" becoming part of "existing culture" (for self and/or community) and constantly alimenting the creative cycle. As Zittoun and collaborators (2003, p. 441) suggest, "with the use of symbolic resources, there is always something produced, something externalized, which is attached to the producer primarily by the gaze of the other". This implies the strong links between the creative outcome and the *identity* of the creator(s), as well as the role of the other in constructing this identity. At the same time, creativity could not exist outside of our relation with other people within a cultural setting since every new artifact needs constant *meaning-making processes* that make sense of it and this becomes possible only by using what Buner (1990) calls interpretative procedures. What is of key importance in the cultural psychology approach is that these interpretations are always *context-dependent* (Montuori & Purser, 1995) and therefore there is no "real" or "objective" creativity, but one that is constructed within communities, in relation to authors and creative products.

Another conclusion derived from this framework is that creativity is a *generative* process; it is connected to previous knowledge and cultural repertoires and in a dialogical relationship with the "old" or the "already-there". Any innovative idea or object never comes out *ex nihilo*, as in the romantic visions of the genius specific to the He-paradigm. This aspect has been recognized early on in the literature, the fact that "human creativity uses what is already existing and available and changes it in unpredictable ways" (Arieti, 1976, p. 4; see also Liep, 2001; Hennessey, 2003a; Negus

& Pickering, 2004). Moreover, a history of misconception of what *tradition* is needs to be challenged. In the creativity framework above, tradition and previous knowledge are part and parcel of the creative process, since, as Feldman (1974, p. 68) notes, "all creative thought springs from a base of cultural knowledge and is therefore, by definition, part of a cultural tradition -- even when it breaks with tradition". Furthermore, tradition itself is not a pre-given, singular, rigid and abstract cultural entity (Negus & Pickering, 2004); creativity and tradition are *interpenetrated* and, in all cases, the emergence and meaning of innovation is bound up with tradition (Wilson, 1984).

Alongside these theoretical considerations, the cultural psychology framework presented above has a potentially great impact on *creativity research*. The problems under the scrutiny of sociocultural psychologists correspond to the four composing elements of the tetradic framework and their interrelations. For example, when looking at the creative "*self*", the author(s) of the creative outcome, one central aspect to be investigated has to do with identity and especially "creative identities", how they are constructed, re-constructed and manifested while performing the creative task and outside of it. When focusing on "*others*", or the community/communities creators are in dialogue with, it would be interesting to observe how members of different communities assess the creativity of one and the same artifact. Changing to "*previous knowledge*", one immediate question is how it is used in the creative act, what artifacts from our cultural repertoires become activated, turning into symbolic resources that sustain the creative activity, and how they combine in order to generate a novel output. This leads to the "*new artifact*" and the meaning-making processes taking place around the "new", how it is understood by both creator, community and maybe society at large, how is it anchored and made familiar (to use a social representations theory terminology; Moscovici, 2000), and how it becomes part of the existing set of artifacts allowing further creative cycles to take place. Above all, what should come to the front are the *dialogical connections* between self and other, previous knowledge and new artifact, that are considered in any cultural research in their unity, as a dynamic and ecological whole.

Principally, what distinguishes cultural research on creativity is the *emic* perspective on the phenomenon (see Smith & Bond, 1998). This ultimately means that researchers are advised to go to the field with the least amount of preconceptions about what creativity is or should be and to connect to the local ways of sense-making specific to the setting they are investigating. An emic-oriented researcher would be very careful in applying "scientific" Western notions of creativity to other places in the world (for a discussion see Westwood & Low, 2003, p. 237-238). Consequently *social* "*constructions*" of what a certain creative outcome is, how creative it is and, above all, what creativity is, are all to be carefully collected from participants in order to capture how both the "image" and "manifestation" of creativity are interrelated in any particular cultural setting.

2.2.2. Relevance and implications of the cultural psychology framework

The cultural psychology of creativity and, more specifically, the tetradic framework discussed above, represent a *proposition* for a novel approach to creativity rather than a definite theory. It is a work in progress that, despite its general and abstract formulation at this stage, could greatly improve our understanding of creativity. The present article tries to put forward a broad formulation

of a cultural psychology of creativity that draws from both sociocultural theories (notions of artifacts and symbolic resources, the theory of dialogicality, etc.) and social, systemic models of creativity. What both perspectives have in common is a rejection of an individualistic and reductionist view of creativity as a purely individual phenomenon and an emphasis put on the role of self-other relations in creative acts.

In this regard, using a cultural psychology approach improves existing social-psychological accounts by going beyond the perspective of the social as an environment that constrains or facilitates creative acts. Creativity is not simply "conditioned" by social factors, its mere nature is relational since it could not exist outside of cultural resources and dialogical relations. Furthermore, the tetradic framework elaborates further current systemic models like that of Csikszentmihalyi by using a *broader conceptualization* of the "field" (social structures) and the "domain" (cultural structures). While systemic models are useful for the analysis of socially valuable creations (cases of historical creativity), the cultural model aims to be relevant for the study of different forms of creativity, from "minor" creative expressions to revolutionary creations. In order to accomplish this, it conceives the field and domain in a more flexible and less "institutional" manner. The "field", seen as a group of experts allowing or not the creation to enter a certain domain, is only a particular instance of the possible role "others" play in the process of creativity. The notion of "other/community" used in the tetradic framework therefore allows us to capture more facets of the "other": from persons in the vicinity of the creator to the members of different social groups the creator is part of, and, finally, to the institutions that validate a work as being creative or not. Similarly, the "domain" is more than a structured field of knowledge (like a scientific branch or an artistic discipline for example) that will, in the end, incorporate or reject the creation. The notion of "existing artifacts/culture" I made reference to in the cultural framework incorporates all forms of material and symbolic resources that inform the creative process and these can be drawn from several "domains" as well as common-sense knowledge. More fundamentally, what the cultural psychology perspective advocates for is the *multiplicity* of "fields" and "domains" a person engages within any form of creative activity and the necessity of studying as many levels of the "social and cultural" context of the phenomenon as possible in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of each particular situation. The theoretical position of cultural psychology sets two specific and interrelated goals for any sociocultural approach to creativity: 1) to unpack the *microgenesis* of creativity in community settings and 2) to operate with a *contextual definition* of creativity, dependent upon "local" or "folk" notions of creativity.

These two aims have a series of consequences for how we theorize and study creativity. The theoretical implication involves a reconceptualization of the levels of creativity by locating all of them at a community level. Deriving from this, the practical implication refers to creativity assessment and the need for a more ecological and contextualized way of appreciating creative outcomes. Both of these are discussed as follows.

From a cultural psychology perspective, thinking in terms of *polarities* such as P-creativity (creative for the person) and H-creativity (creative for society) (Boden, 1994), creativity in the small and

mature creativity (Cohen & Ambrose, 1999) or, respectively, "little c" and "big C" (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003), is generally misleading. From the beginning these suggest a hierarchy in creativity that often trivializes the notion of everyday creativity (Bateson, 1999). Second, although it is largely acknowledged nowadays that there is a *continuum* in creative expression (for steps in this continuum see Cohen & Ambrose, 1999), the habit of dichotomizing creativity can only disconnect the different modalities of being creative. Finally, this polarization also opens the risk of unwillingly promoting the "dissolution" of creativity either by considering every human act as creative or by setting standards for creativity so high that the vast majority of people could never reach it (Negus & Pickering, 2004). What solution is there?

A possible answer, reflective of the cultural psychology approach, is to acknowledge the social and cultural roots of *all types* of creative expression, from personal to historical. From this perspective, although there are numerous differences between the works of art of an established modernist painter and the drawings of a toddler, in the end they both emerge within a social context and from the use of cultural means. Creativity always takes place in a community and the creative outcome is generally of interest for multiple communities. This helps us "*relocate*" creativity from the extremes (person or society) to the "*middle*" and, by this, to give it a more sensible position (Glăveanu, in press; a similar argument has been recently supported by Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008). As mentioned earlier, the notion of "field" from systemic models of creativity takes on a new meaning when social groups are theorized as *communities*. A community is not understood only in its topographical sense or as a local social system; it necessarily requires the existence of communion, of close ties and the feeling of belongingness between its members (see Urry, 2007) and can describe different social realities, from small groups to organizations and larger social structures. Communities exist where they are felt and experienced as such (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Most importantly, communities support their own culture (Duveen, 2007) and it is in communities that people find not only the resources they need to create but also the "parameters" for making sense of the world (Jovchelovitch, 2007) and all its creative, new artifacts.

This last suggestion has direct implications for *assessing creativity*. As repeatedly argued, "the creativity of an idea depends not just on the content of the idea but the way in which that idea is developed, presented and interpreted" (Bilton, 2007, p. 6). This fact is stressed by most definitions of creativity (see Stein, 1962; Gardner, 1994; Fischer et al., 2005). The argument that "creativity is socially defined" (Nijstad & Paulus, 2003, p. 339), gives even more impetus to social and cultural psychologists in showing that there would be no creativity without others to appreciate it as such. In fact, what this approach argues is that creativity is not inherent to artifacts or persons but it is *socially attributed* to them. Furthermore, all judgments about creativity are historically located and there is no "view from nowhere", an absolute statement about what is or is not creative. Understanding how and why different social groups attribute creativity differently (or similarly) is one of the main tasks of a cultural psychology of creativity. And this is because being creative always means being creative *for someone* (person, group, society) at a particular time and place. Under these circumstances, the traditional practice of assessing creativity with the use of experts, trained persons able to offer "informed" opinions, offers only a partial picture. This practice

contributes further to associating creativity only with certain types of "specialist" fields, like art, technology or science. It presupposes working with pre-set and universal definitions of creativity therefore adopting an etic stand, as opposed to an emic one, open to the local (personal and/or community) understandings of what is and is not creative.

But, as Amabile (1996) comes to demonstrate through her Consensual Assessment Technique (also Hennessey, 2003b), there is generally no need for already made definitions. The basic assumption of this method is that appropriate observers (again usually with some formal training in the field) implicitly work with *similar notions* about what is creative, despite the fact that they are not formalized or given. Without getting into its details, this technique is based on the idea of consensus, of converging beliefs and perceptions about creativity.

From a cultural psychology perspective, creativity assessment should be as "ecological" as possible and *rely on multiple feedback at the cost of getting diverging opinions* (and, to an extent, pursuing exactly that). More precisely, creative products and processes should be assessed by members of significant or relevant communities, which are those "affected" by or in contact with the creative work, as well as the creator himself. To take an example, a teenager's artwork should not be subject only to expert judgments (persons trained in art), but also to the judgment of peers, parents, teachers and members from other groups and communities that get to see the creative productions or are generally interested in art (from other artists to potential buyers). Since the creative outcome requires meaning-making processes and these, in their turn, depend on the particular socio-cultural circumstances of the persons attributing meaning, the "multiple feedback" is often less consensual but far more useful, including for the teenager in our example. The importance of this perspective resides in its simultaneous focus, in real-life contexts, on a) the *reasons* behind attributions of creativity by several social actors, b) the *functions* these attributions serve and c) the *consequences* they have on both creator and creative process. This technique certainly does not aim to promote the idea that higher consensus between different groups would validate something as being "in reality" creative because the search for this kind of "ultimate" and "objective" statements goes against the *constructionist nature* of the investigation. It also does not reject scientific or expert appreciations about the creativity of certain outcomes but considers them as one form of assessment among others, coming from non-expert but nevertheless relevant groups of persons connected in one way or another to the "creation". Since the meaning-making processes around creativity and their link to particular social milieus are paramount, there is no hierarchy of viewpoints to be established.

3. Concluding remarks about the future of the We-paradigm

As argued in this article, there are three major paradigms that have shaped and continue to influence the trajectory of creativity in psychology. Historically, individualistic approaches constitute the norm, locating creativity either inside "unique" individuals (the He-paradigm) or inside each and every person taken separately (the I-paradigm). It is only in the last decades that more emphasis has been put on the role of social factors in the creative process. These are the first signs of a new paradigm, the We-paradigm, aiming to develop more systemic approaches of creativity,

comprehensive views that incorporate multiple levels, from individuals and interpersonal interactions, to groups and cultures (Simonton, 2003, p. 320). And yet, the whole project of the We-paradigm may be *derailed* by letting the theoretization go only half-way. This "incomplete" vision sees the social and cultural as coercive instances, as an environment that has the power to facilitate or inhibit creative expression. In the end, the person still sits "alone", self-contained and self-sufficient, ready to confront the "system" and, if "creative enough", to defeat it.

In this context, the cultural psychology of creativity advocated here tries to take a step forward in consolidating the We-paradigm. For those looking for universalistic claims and "fit-all" models of creativity, this approach will be disappointing. It has no "formulas" (Littleton & Miell, 2004, p. 2) and promotes the *contextual and situated study* of creative acts, persons and communities. What the cultural psychology of creativity will have to offer are, first and foremost, research examples of "good-practice" and theoretical approaches that try to see creativity in all its complexity. This new direction also brings with it practical consequences outside of the scientific realm. One has already been formulated by Montuori and Purser (1995, p. 104): a shift in our cultural project of dominating the environment to nurturing and engendering creative relationships within it. It is a reminder of our *responsibility* as community members to build spaces for dialogue and creativity for both self and others, of the fact that, living interconnected with other people, our creative expression could and should be able to fertilize the common soil of creativity around us.

It is hard to make predictions about the direction in which creativity theory will move. While the future of the We-paradigm is hard to anticipate, and it probably too early to be anticipated, the future of creativity in psychology is sure to be looking bright. For as long as psychologists find creativity instrumental for our adaptability, self-expression, and health (Runco, 2004), it will continue to attract the interest of both theorists and researchers. But we should remember that creativity also exists beyond psychology. As Magyari-Beck (1999) argues when describing the new science of *Creatology*, the nature of creativity research is increasingly cross-disciplinary bringing together psychologists, sociologists, artists, educators, historians, managers, economists, etc. under a common enterprise. Perhaps at this broader level the We-paradigm will become more rapidly influential and sociocultural psychologists could play a key role in this future development.

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