Is Creativity Universal or Culture Specific?

By

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All interested are welcome
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Abstract

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Is creativity universal or culture-specific? Are different aspects of creativity randomly distributed across cultures or are certain aspects of creativity (idea novelty vs. idea usefulness and appropriateness) more prevalent in some cultures than others?

The first study (Nouri, Erez, Rockstuhl, & Ang), using an idea generation task, investigates creativity processes in homogenous vs. culturally heterogeneous dyads. The heterogeneous dyads consisted of an Israeli and a Singaporean, whereas the homogenous dyads consisted of two Israelis or two Singaporeans. In general, homogenous dyads were more creative. Qualitative analysis demonstrated that communication barriers existed in the culturally heterogeneous dyads. Although Singaporeans and Israelis obtained similar scores on a creativity test when performed individually, when working together, Singaporean dyads were less original than Israeli dyads, but they elaborated more on each idea to stress its appropriateness when compared to the Israeli dyads.

The second study (Nouri, Erez, & Lee) explores individual differences in creativity and whether these differences vary across cultures. We sampled 65 Americans, 100 Chinese, 50 Swedish and 62 Israelis in train stations in these respective countries (54% were male; age ranged from 16-66). The results revealed differences in reported personal characteristics such as creativity breakthrough and need for uniqueness. For example, the Chinese respondents had the lowest scores on creativity breakthrough and need for uniqueness. However, when measuring actual creative performance as assessed by a creative insight task, no significant differences were found among respondents of the different countries, suggesting that people from different cultures have similar levels of creative ability.

The current study (Nouri, Erez, Lee, Chiu, Liang, & Bannister) further examines the role of cultural values on creativity and also examines the process of new idea generation under different work contexts across cultures (Israel/USA/China/Hong-Kong). These countries differ in their cultural values such as individualism-collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance. We study whether cultural values influence the level of creativity in the two fundamental aspects of creative thinking, namely: novelty and usefulness. Additionally, we will also examine the moderating effect of work context (i.e., social facilitation and task structure) on the relationship between culture and creativity. We hypothesize that working in the presence of others will amplify the effect of cultural values on the newly generated ideas. In contrast, working privately neutralizes the cultural effects on the type of creative outcomes. Working on an ambiguous task context also magnifies the effect of cultural values on creative outcomes, compared to a specific and clear task context.

Moreover, although creativity is generally defined and perceived positively in different cultures, we propose there are still substantial differences in the way creativity is perceived across cultures. Therefore, we developed a questionnaire aiming to capture the ‘meaning of creativity’ with sub-scales (e.g. breakthrough, usefulness, well being, re-interpretation etc.). The questionnaire is still under development. The studies describe above will assist to answer the questions of whether creativity is universal or cultural specific, by demonstrating the universal aspects, as well as the social-cultural aspects of creativity processes. Implications will be further discussed.

Ms Rikki Nouri, PhD candidate in William Davidson Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management at the Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, is a visiting scholar of the Centre for Leadership & Innovation (CLI). Ms Nouri is invited by CLI to give us the presentation and is currently collaborating with the Co-directors of CLI, Dr Warren Chiu and Prof. Cynthia Lee, on a comparative study of innovation, which examines the process of new idea generation under different conditions in Israel, USA, China and Hong Kong.