



Culture and the Assessment of Creativity

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ABSTRACT Laboratory studies of culture and creativity typically rely upon measures of divergent thinking while studies of creativity in organizational settings explicitly define creativity and use subject matter experts as assessors to account for the influence of culture on the assessment of creativity. Yet, little is known about what specific characteristics of a creative idea are considered when creativity is assessed by communities of experts (the field) in different spheres of creative activities (domain). In this article, we review, conceptually analyse, and illustrate using original interview data the influence of culture on the assessment of two commonly examined dimensions of overall creativity, novelty, and usefulness. Using the context of expatriates, we propose a framework, along with propositions, that integrates cultural experience, creativity criteria, and assessor perspectives on creativity assessment. Finally, we discuss ways in which a focus upon the processes underlying creativity assessments could help advance research on culture and creativity.

KEYWORDS assessment of creativity, China, creativity

INTRODUCTION

Most research on culture and creativity has focused on the creators – the individuals who produce a new idea or product. There is much evidence about ways in which culture influences creators and what they produce (see Erez & Nouri, 2010; Simonton & Ting, 2010; Zhou & Su, 2010). Yet, there is another side to creativity where additional cultural influences may operate. Creativity also involves a creator's contribution being assessed as valuable by an audience, recipient, or evaluator. In part, creativity lies in the eye of the beholder. How does a beholder's assessment of creativity differ across cultures? How should these differences in assessment influence how creative behaviours and outcomes differ as a function of culture?

In this article, we review research related to culture and creativity assessment and then raise related questions for future research. We review research on East/West differences in lay people's conceptualizations (or implicit theories) of creativity, noting some cultural convergences and divergences around the two dimensions

of novelty and usefulness as defined by Amabile (1982, 1983). We then consider Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) arguments that creativity is assessed by the field – the community of experts in a profession, craft, or specialty – relative to what is previously established in the domain, the sphere of activity in which the creator and field operate. Given that in most domains there are differences between prevailing ideas and practices in the East and West, different assessments of creativity would be made by the different fields even if their conceptualizations or standards of creativity were alike. For example, common managerial practices from the West, such as 360 degree feedback, might appear 'novel' to senior managers in China. We review how past researchers have dealt with the inherent context dependency of creativity assessments and emphasize the need for more attention to understanding how creativity assessments are made in real world organizational settings. After the literature review, we conceptually analyse, illustrating through the use of original interview data, how culture influences the assessment of novelty and usefulness. We then introduce a framework of how culture influences the assessment of creativity, using expatriates in China as a context. We also offer propositions stemming from this framework. Finally, we suggest the implications for creativity assessment in multicultural teams.

EXTANT RESEARCH ON CULTURE AND CREATIVITY ASSESSMENT

The existing research on culture and creative performance has been extensively reviewed (see Erez & Nouri, 2010; Simonton & Ting, 2010; Zhou & Su, 2010). Our review focuses on two specific issues of creativity assessment. The first issue concerns the conceptualization of creativity held by people. The second issue concerns the ways in which creativity has been assessed in studies using laboratory and organizational settings. In focusing on how culture influences the assessment of creativity, we compare general Western and Chinese concepts of creativity in order to examine the question of what creativity is, and how it is recognized in these two cultures.

Lay People's Conceptualization of Creativity

Studies of implicit theories of creativity examine the underlying conceptualizations that people have of creativity (Sternberg, 1985). In contrast to the prevalent approach of explicitly providing participants with a definition and measurement of creativity as novelty plus usefulness (Amabile, 1982, 1983) adopted in most managerial research, implicit theory studies rely on the conceptualizations of creativity that lay (common or ordinary) people bring with them to the study. Lay people's conceptualizations of creativity are folk theories because their beliefs about creativity originate from the customs, traditions, and values of their culture, unfiltered

by expert or professional knowledge. The consensus among researchers who examine common people's folk theories of creativity appears to be that there are similar conceptualizations of creativity across cultures, but with enough differences that cultural effects must be considered (Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Rudowicz, 2003; Rudowicz & Yue, 2000).

Chinese, similar to Westerners, appear to view creativity as incorporating 'innovative ideas', 'imagination', and 'independence' (Rudowicz & Hui, 1997), but there are also significant differences. Unlike Westerners, Chinese also tend to see creativity as including a 'contribution to the progress of society' (Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). Group interests being seen as more important than individual interests is one possible reason for the Chinese inclusion of a social element into conceptualizations of creativity (Chan & Chan, 1999). Another proposed reason is that Chinese emphasize the role that an individual must perform in life (Rudowicz & Yue, 2000). As further evidence that Chinese tend to have a more social view of creativity, it appears that Chinese attribute creativity to influential people (Yue, 2004): being influential is in itself evidence of creativity.

Closely related to conceptualizations of creativity are the views held of the characteristics of creative people. Just as there is considerable agreement between Chinese and Westerners about the concept of creativity, so also is there agreement that the characteristics of creative people include motivational qualities, cognitive traits, and personality characteristics (Rudowicz, 2003; Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). However, there are also significant differences. For example, Westerners view 'humour' and 'aesthetic sensitivity' as characteristics of creative individuals, while Chinese do not appear to consider these as creative attributes of people (Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). Instead, traits with negative connotations, such as 'opinionated' or 'rebellious', are typically mentioned by Chinese as characteristic of creative individuals (Chan & Chan, 1999).

The differences in common or ordinary people's conception of creativity and creative persons between Western and Chinese cultures are most striking when the attractiveness of creativity is considered. In the West, many of the qualities associated with creativity, such as independence or assertiveness, are seen within a desirable light. However, characteristics which Chinese associate with creativity, such as rebelliousness, self-centredness or arrogance, carry far more negative social connotations (Chan & Chan, 1999).

This very brief review makes it clear that, while there is broad agreement between Western and Chinese cultures about both the concept of creativity and characteristics of creative individuals, there are also significant differences in the details. However, to see whether these detailed differences in conceptualizations serve to influence creative performance or the assessment of it, it is necessary to turn to the explicit studies of culture and creativity. In these studies, the researcher predetermines the definition of creativity used in the study and provides partici-

pants with cues (e.g., items on a questionnaire, instructions on criteria, novelty and usefulness, used to rate employees and their work) to which they must respond.

The Challenge in Assessing Creative Performance across Cultures

It has been argued that creativity only exists relative to specific domains of performance, knowledge, or production (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Typically in the creativity literature, the term domain refers to the sphere of activity, such as the 'artistic' or 'scientific' domains or sub-domains (e.g., sculpture, physics) thereof (Runco & Bahleda, 1986) in which the creative performance occurs. An example of domain-specific differences in creative performance is that the graphical characters in the Chinese language help to enhance figural-spatial creativity (i.e., assessments of creativity through drawing) among Chinese people (Rudowicz, Lok, & Kitto, 1995). Another example is that mathematics education enhances Chinese performance in mathematical creativity tests (Zha, 1998, cited in Niu & Sternberg, 2002).

Csikszentmihalyi (1977) also posits that creativity is assessed by the experts within each domain, which he terms 'the field'. Those in the profession – the community of subject matter experts – comprise the field. Under this view, it is necessary to simultaneously consider the creative individual (creator), the domain (activity requiring creativity) into which the creative output (e.g., idea, solution) is being introduced, and the field (assessor) who evaluates creativity in that domain. This represents a particular challenge for researchers conducting creativity research across cultures because it is necessary to simultaneously consider many factors – the creators, factors influencing creativity, and those who assess the creative outputs.

Laboratory studies. Laboratory studies of culture and creativity have typically adopted identical operationalizations of creativity across cultures (Niu & Sternberg, 2002), treating creativity as equivalent to flexibility (De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008). In doing so, the findings from research relying on lay conceptions of creativity and the potential for domain and field effects (as defined by Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) are largely overlooked. Ignoring domain effects reflects the assumption that creativity is the same in all spheres of activity (e.g., creativity in dance is the same as creativity in engineering) while a lack of consideration of field effects ignores the possibility that different communities of experts (e.g., dancers, engineers) may differ in what they consider to be creative. The problem stemming from the separation of creativity operationalizations from the domain and the field to which the creativity is applied is often exacerbated by the use of operationalizations emphasizing divergent thinking. For example, research on multicultural experience and creativity uses tests, such as the Duncker candle problem, which is closely related to divergent thinking (e.g., Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008;

Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). While these studies provide valuable insight into factors affecting creativity, the antecedents of novelty in particular, divergent thinking has been criticized (Amabile, 1996; Niu & Sternberg, 2002) as being only weakly related to real-world creative performance.

An alternative used in experimental research is to adopt culture-specific views of creativity based upon lay people's conceptualization of creativity in their specific cultures, but this remains rare and gives rise to difficulties in making comparisons when different measures are used. As a way of addressing this difficulty, Niu and Sternberg (2001) used both Chinese and American raters to provide ratings of the artistic creativity of Chinese and American students, and compared the ratings made by them. While both sets of raters gave similar ratings, prior researchers have found culture-specific criteria (e.g., Binnie-Dawson & Choi, 1982). If a field is a community of experts, the Niu and Sternberg study does not answer the question of whether there are cross-cultural differences in field effects as the raters were not experts but graduate students.

A final method to assess creativity used in laboratory studies is the consensual approach (Amabile, 1996), where multiple raters are used to achieve reliable creativity assessments. In these studies, raters of creativity are assumed to be the subject matter experts, that is, the field, because of their knowledge and experience in the domain. In most cases, the multiple raters are asked to provide an overall assessment of creativity, although rarely are the novelty and usefulness components evaluated separately (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). When these two components are evaluated separately, there is debate over how the two components should be combined to form a single scale (Shalley et al., 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2003) as an overall assessment of creativity.

Organizational studies. Organizational studies of creativity almost always use expert ratings, typically relying upon ratings provided by a single supervisor (Shalley et al., 2004). There are three published scales to do this: Oldham and Cummings (1996); Tierney, Farmer, and Graen (1999); and George and Zhou (2001). All three scales measure creativity as a unitary construct, but at present it remains unclear whether any of these scales offers a significant advantage over the others (Shalley et al., 2004). A primary focus of the organizational research has been to determine how individual factors (i.e., gender) and contextual factors (characteristics of the employing organization or supervisor, i.e., leadership style) interact to influence individuals' creativity, or how individuals respond to creativity assessments, rather than examining field effects upon assessments. One means of incorporating field (i.e., rater) characteristics, such as raters' prototypes of creative individuals, into this research is to examine the way in which rater reactions to creative behaviours influence the expression of creativity (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). The focus of this research is to determine reactions to creativity assessments, rather than determining the basis of that assessment.

The creativity research which has examined rater effects in organizational settings has concentrated upon the degree of agreement between self and supervisory ratings. Most research indicates that there tends to be a high degree of agreement in ratings, and some studies (e.g., Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Tierney et al., 1999) suggest that agreement can depend upon both the job and the way in which creativity is operationalized (Shalley et al., 2004). In these cases, there is a need to examine how specific attributes of the product are evaluated by the rater in making these assessments (Simonton, 2000).

Research on patent applications provides a good example to show the importance of considering the processes underlying subject expert ratings. American and European criteria for determining whether a patent will be granted include novelty, non-obviousness or inventive step, and utility or industrial applicability (O'Malley, Bostanci, & Calvert, 2005). The first two criteria correspond to the novelty dimension while the last criterion is similar to the usefulness dimension of creativity. Patent examiners have subject matter expertise, with discipline appropriate advanced degrees, including Ph.D.s, in the disciplines (e.g., engineering, biology, financial analysis) for which they examine patents (Lehman, 2001). Moreover, in making their assessments of whether an invention is novel, non-obvious, and has utility, patent examiners look at existing technology and previously issued patents by the offices in the three regions that grant the majority of patents, the U.S., Europe, and Japan (Barton, 2004), as well as journals and other publications that may be relevant to the application (Lehman, 2001). Despite their domain expertise and legitimacy as integral members of the field, the judgment of examiners in areas, such as the threshold they use for determining non-obviousness (e.g., Barton, 2004), is a point of contention. Even definitions of criteria, such as what constitutes utility, are subject to reinterpretation in courts of law (Ghose, 2007). The current state of the patent system, with its reliance on the subject matter expert judgment of patent examiners and scrutiny by patent attorneys, has even led some commentators to question whether the patent system in the U.S. is 'broken' (Doody, 2006). Lessons from patent evaluations thus suggest that a reliance on subject matter experts may not be a panacea for assessing creativity, and that there is a definite need for more research focusing on the assessment of creativity.

Limitations to Extant Research

The conclusion from the prior research is that conceptualizations of creativity are broadly similar across cultures, but with distinctive differences in the details. Much of the past research into culture and creativity assessment has concentrated upon children and educational settings, rather than focusing upon adults and organizational settings. Just as overall creativity research has moved towards using Amabile's (1982, 1983) consensus method of rating creativity in organizational settings, researchers focusing upon the relationships between culture and creativity

have also recognized a need to move to studies and assessment which better predict actual creative performance (Niu & Sternberg, 2002).

The review by Zhou and Su in this volume makes it clear that at present there is relatively little research into culture and creativity in organizational settings, and that much remains to be understood about how cultural factors influence creativity in actual organizations. Researchers have been focusing upon the expression of creative behaviours, but with the exception of researchers examining lay people's conception of creativity, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which cultural factors might influence the assessment of creativity in organizational settings.

CROSS-CULTURAL ASSESSMENT OF CREATIVITY AND PROPOSITIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research into culture and creativity is moving from experimental settings to organizational settings, and the primary means of assessing creativity in organizational settings has been to rely upon subject matter experts, such as supervisors. Using subject matter experts to rate creativity allows for contextually dependent assessments; yet, in focusing upon the outcome of the assessment, researchers have not examined the process by which these assessments are made (Simonton, 2000). Instead, there has been an implicit acceptance that relying upon these experts will result in valid contextually grounded assessments of creativity.

The expression of creativity by individuals is known to be influenced by expected evaluations by others (Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001), which further highlights the importance of understanding how evaluations are made. Research into the appraisal of performance in general has shown that it is important to take into consideration the way in which cognitions and social forces affect rater evaluations (cf. DeNisi, 1996; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). By extension, assessments of creativity should also be influenced by rater cognitions, as well as by the nature of the relationship between the rater and ratee. Research has shown that there are significant differences in the way that Chinese and Western managers appraise subordinate performance (Claus & Briscoe, 2009; Hempel, 2001). Given that there are cultural differences in the way that performance is assessed, it is also reasonable to expect cultural effects in the assessment of creative performance.

Calls to examine the judgment processes used by experts (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003; Simonton, 2000) have not been heeded, and research into the effect of rater cognitions in the making of creative performance assessments remains rare. Social judgment theory has been used as a basis for understanding how evaluations of creativity are made (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). This theory suggests that judgments of creative potential involve dual processes (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003), one of which involves assessors comparing creators' perceived attributes (e.g., quirky, unpredictable) with assessors' implicit model of creativity. As these judgments rely

on assessors' implicit conceptualization of creativity, social judgment theory provides a potential starting point for cross-cultural explorations. Such investigations are necessary given the research showing that lay people's conception of creativity differs across cultures.

Failure to consider rater (i.e., field) effects in creativity assessments can result in bias, because assessments of novelty and usefulness are a critical element in the adoption and absorption of creative ideas by the field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). When ideas or potential solutions are not recognized as being creative, they are less likely to be adopted, and as a result there is a need to understand the process through which creative ideas are recognized, accepted, and ultimately adopted. The way in which creativity is assessed plays a determining role in the patterns of innovation in a domain.

A better understanding of how creativity is assessed, and cultural influences therein, could inform research on creative performance. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to considering how a focus upon creativity assessments could influence creativity research. We specifically review the influence of culture on the assessment of novelty and usefulness. We then review the current literature and conceptually analyse the assessment of novelty separately from the assessment of usefulness. We supplement this review and analysis with a few illustrative quotes from interviews we conducted of managers in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. Drawing insights from our review, conceptual analysis, and interview data, we then propose a framework and offer several propositions that integrate cultural experience, creativity criteria, and assessor perspectives on creativity assessment. We use expatriate experiences in China as the context to discuss this framework and develop the propositions.

Measuring Novelty and Usefulness Independently

Any operationalization of the theoretical definition of creativity as solutions which are both novel and useful (Amabile, 1982, 1983) requires that assessors make evaluations of the two dimensions of novelty and usefulness. However, as discussed earlier, existing assessments in organizational studies collapse these two dimensions into a single unidimensional scale. Examples include a three-item scale (Oldham & Cummings, 1996: 'How original and practical is this person's work?', 'How adaptive and practical is this person's work?', and 'How creative is this person's work?') and a 13-item scale (Zhou & George, 2001: e.g., 'Comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance', 'Develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas'). One- and four-item versions of these scales, respectively, have also been used by other researchers (e.g., Baer & Oldham, 2006; Van Dyne, Jehn, & Cummings, 2002).

Evidence that cultural influences on creative performance are specific to the novelty and usefulness dimensions can be drawn from the laboratory research with

divergent thinking tasks. For example, under the condition of generating a solution in interaction with another person, Israelis were found to emphasize originality of ideas, while Singaporeans focused more upon providing a great deal of detail for their ideas (Nouri, Erez, Rockstuhl, Ang, 2008), indicating a greater emphasis upon the usefulness of their ideas. There is also evidence of the differential attractiveness of these dimensions across cultures, with some cultures being more attracted to novelty while other cultures are attracted to usefulness. When participants were told directly that an object was novel or useful, Chinese were more attracted to novel products while Americans were more attracted to useful ones (Paletz & Peng, 2008). This paradox – that Chinese are found to be attracted to novelty, despite their bias towards usefulness when generating solutions – needs to be reconciled in future research.

The same processes underlying differences in the attractiveness of novelty and usefulness may contribute to differences in the assessment of novelty and usefulness. That said, Paletz and Peng's (2008) findings are not conclusive with regard to this, because in their procedure participants were told whether an object was novel or useful, rather than given an object to assess. However, if continuing research corroborates the difference in attractiveness of novelty and usefulness, this could provide one illustration of field effects (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) as applied to cross-cultural domains. We may expect Chinese and American managers to react differently to the same idea, depending upon the extent to which the managers assessed that idea as novel or useful.

Simonton (2000) has pointed out that the underlying criteria needed to make evaluations of the two dimensions of novelty and usefulness are different. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggests that the criteria used by the field in assessing the two creativity dimensions would depend upon the domain. An idea which would be considered novel by one community of raters (field) might not be considered novel by another field. Not only do fields (e.g., information technology researchers, manufacturing executives, film critics) differ across domains (e.g., information technology, manufacturing, film) in different cultures in their assessment of creativity but such assessments also, we suggest, vary within the same domain across cultures. We provide examples (quotes from managers we interviewed) to show how fields can vary between and within the same domain across cultures.

Novelty assessment as a function of culture. Consider this example, summarized from one of our exploratory interviews:

K.Y.K. emigrated to the U.S. while a youth. Educated with a Ph.D. in the sciences, and with extensive working experience in American technology companies, K.Y.K. returned to Hong Kong to work in the family company, a manufacturing company, overseeing the introduction of information systems software. He viewed his subordinates as low in creativity because they came up

with no novel technological solutions. By contrast, the chairman (and family patriarch) thought highly of the creativity of these same employees.

It was only later that K.Y.K. realized that his assessments of creativity were based upon his experiences in American technology companies, where the use of information systems was widespread. Having been educated and employed in the West, he failed to see the creativity of many of his subordinate's suggestions. By contrast, within a traditional Chinese company, information systems and the associated organizational formalization are uncommon, so the chairman viewed many of the ideas put forward by the employees as both original and implementable.

The above example illustrates how domains (information technology vs. manufacturing) and culture (United States vs. Hong Kong) influence the assessment of novelty. Within-domain differences also are illustrated by the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Niu & Sternberg, 2002). It has been noted that Western and Chinese reviewers had fundamentally different reactions to the movie (Niu & Sternberg, 2002). Western critics acclaimed the film for its stylistic innovations, whereas Chinese critics assessed it as Ang Lee's weakest movie. Niu and Sternberg (2002) conclude that these groups of film critics have similar implicit theories, but if the folk theories of creativity held by Western and Chinese reviewers are similar, questions remain about why there were such divergent reviews of this movie.

While Niu and Sternberg (2002) use *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to motivate the discussion of differences in folk theories of creativity, ultimately they do not offer any explanation for the differing reactions of Western and Chinese reviewers to this film. We suggest that the answer does not lie in the difference between the way that creativity is viewed in the abstract, but rather in the way in which specific examples are assessed for creative content. That is, while Western and Asian critics both hold novelty to be a component of creativity, Chinese reviewers had seen many similar movies before, and against this backdrop *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* did not stand out as particularly novel. Western reviewers, accustomed to Western-style adventure films, were captivated by the same elements which Chinese reviewers dismissed as derivative and commonplace.

These two examples (i.e., the interview quote and the movie) make it clear that it is critical to consider the criteria used by the community of experts (field) when evaluating novelty, which could differ across culture in the same domains. Although creativity researchers have begun to attend to domain and field differences in creativity, predominantly they have examined how contextual elements, that is, how people's (i.e., creators' and assessors') perceptions of their work environment within a domain, influence creativity (e.g., Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, Herron, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). What we suggest is that the

domain influences not only creative outcomes, but also the assessment of whether something is creative. Ideas can be considered highly creative within one domain by a field in one culture, yet not be viewed as creative by a field in the same domain but a different culture. As our interview with K.Y.K. makes clear, problems can arise when assessors make use of different cultural and domain baselines when making assessments of novelty. Below, we explain how a manager's insight illustrates culture's influence on the assessment of usefulness.

Usefulness assessment as a function of culture. Consider this second example:

One manager who formerly worked for the leading networking and telecommunications equipment supplier in the People's Republic of China, spent much time explaining why he felt that Chinese were more open to technological creativity, but found it difficult to accept creativity applied to problems involving social issues. In this manager's experience, his subordinates and coworkers were very open to ideas which increase product features while simultaneously reducing production costs. However, there was a great deal of difficulty in accepting creative solutions to social problems, both due to a reluctance to change traditionally prescribed social relationships, as well as due to the difficulties of getting all members of the relevant social grouping to accept the new idea. By contrast, creative ideas applied to the technological domain were less likely to be viewed as a potential threat to group or social cohesiveness.

The manager's observation above is interesting in light of findings about the influence of the social environment or climate upon creativity in the West (Amabile et al., 1996), which emphasizes the role of supervisory and work group encouragement in promoting or discouraging creativity. With the highly interdependent nature of Chinese social relationships, it appears that ideas that have the potential to threaten or disturb the social status quo are either discouraged by others or self-censored by the individual. In this way, an individual perceiving that certain ideas are not acceptable (i.e., useful) would suppress those ideas, ultimately acting to reduce the novelty of their ideas. The social environment, in the Chinese context as well as elsewhere, is not only an enabler but also an arbiter of creativity.

Further evidence that within a given culture the acceptance of creative ideas is domain-dependant can be found in research examining organizational changes and the acceptance of technological innovations in China. This research has found that there was ready acceptance of new ideas which were applied to technological domains, but only those aspects of the ideas which were consistent with existing social norms were accepted (Hempel & Kwong, 2001; Hempel & Martinsons, 2009). These findings echo previous findings that Chinese assessments of creativity emphasize the social and moral aspects of a solution (Chan & Chan, 1999; Rudowicz & Hui, 1997). It has been noted that Chinese tend to ascribe creativity to people

with social influence (Yue, 2004). This juxtaposition of ideas, that it is difficult to be creative in the social domain, yet socially influential people are viewed as creative, is striking. It is important to focus research examining these points in further detail. Social environment would not only influence the level of creativity as argued by Amabile et al. (1996), but would also have differential effects across domains, through either self-censorship or the rejection of ideas by work groups or supervisors.

Creativity and Cross-cultural Experience: Assessment of Expatriates

Experience of multiple cultures can arise from expatriation, immigration, or living within multicultural communities. Using expatriates as the context, we analyse how culture can independently influence the assessment of novelty and usefulness. Recent research on expatriation suggests that the experience of living or working in other cultures can stimulate creative abilities (Leung et al., 2008; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Maddux, Leung, Chiu, Galinsky, 2009). Using a variety of tasks, such as the Duncker candle problem and the Remote Associates Test, Maddux and Galinsky (2009) found that extended stays abroad, but not merely travel, are associated with enhanced creativity. Creativity gains associated with overseas stays are mediated by the degree of adaptation to the local culture during these stays, which suggests that cross-cultural experience may exercise people's mental flexibility which is needed for creativity (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2008; Simonton, 1999). Adaptation to another culture can involve taking on different habits, beliefs, values, and even identifications. We postulate how the assessment of novelty, usefulness, and overall creativity of expatriates may vary as a function of the field.

Host country as field. It is illuminating to consider the effects of expatriate experience on organizational creativity in light of the arguments we have developed about novelty and usefulness assessment being a function of fields that vary across cultures. Consider the case of Western expatriates working in China. Newly arrived expatriates would have limited contextual knowledge of the Chinese host culture. They, for example, would not know the local norms and procedures, the prevailing tastes, the taboo ideas associated with previous failures or disgraced leaders; in short, they would be unable to anticipate which ideas would be accepted, so their proposals may not be assessed as useful. At the same time, being cultural outsiders, expatriates bring new perspectives which might yield novel ideas and solutions. From the perspective of the Chinese field, a newly arrived expatriate's proposals are likely to seem novel, but not useful, and hence low in creativity. However, as the expatriate adapts to Chinese culture and its expression by employees in the local organization, it should become easier to choose solutions that would be acceptable and deemed useful by the local field. As the expatriate gains flexibility

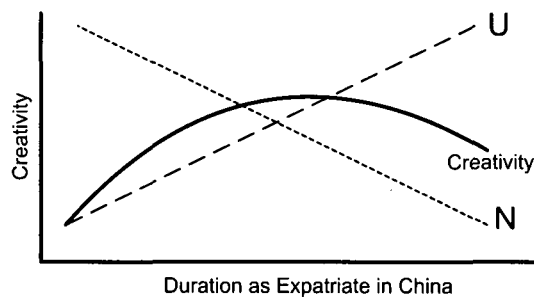
from the experience of adapting, their capacity for novelty and hence overall creativity may increase.

However, different forms of adaptation may be associated with different profiles of creativity over time. One form of adaptation is assimilation (Berry, 1980), in which expatriates embrace the values and beliefs of the host culture while abandoning those of their heritage culture. At the extreme, some expatriates 'go native' and adopt beliefs, values, and self-identities strongly associated with the Chinese culture – converts to a religion or culture sometimes becoming its greatest zealots. For strong assimilators, conscious or unconscious self-censoring of ideas inconsistent with Chinese culture might reduce the extent to which their ideas are assessed as novel. Thus, we suggest that as an expatriate becomes more assimilated to China, the combined effect of these two separate dimensions would be that their apparent creativity ($C = N \times U$) to the local field would increase for a time and then plateau and ultimately decline. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

As seen in Figure 1, we depict overall creativity as a multiplicative function of novelty and usefulness. Moreover, we suggest that there is a trade-off between novelty and usefulness for expatriates who assimilate completely into Chinese culture. This is because complete assimilation into Chinese culture requires separation from the heritage culture. Separation from heritage cultural influences reduces exposure to ideas originating in the heritage culture that are novel to Chinese culture because the decision to separate implies a rejection of the heritage culture and its products. At the same time, assimilation into Chinese culture increases knowledge of the values and practices of Chinese culture; hence, what is useful and acceptable.

From the perspective of the Chinese field, therefore, newly arrived expatriates would be high in novelty as they introduce ideas and solutions that are novel to Chinese culture, but they are low in usefulness because the ideas are acceptable in the heritage culture but not the host culture. At this stage, expatriates do not have high overall creativity because they are high in novelty but low in usefulness. As their assimilation continues, however, expatriates reach a plateau in terms of

Figure 1. Creativity of assimilating expatriates as assessed from the local Chinese perspective



Notes: creativity, overall creativity; N, creativity as novelty; U, creativity as usefulness.

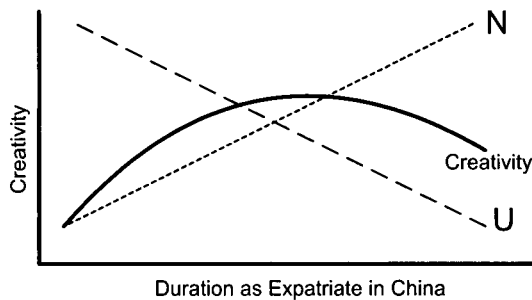
overall creativity. They are still introducing novel ideas to Chinese culture because they have not yet separated completely from their heritage culture, but these ideas lack the novelty of ideas introduced early in their expatriate experience because they are more distant from their heritage culture and not as cognizant of ongoing developments in their heritage culture. Yet, they still do not have a complete understanding of Chinese culture and are unable to introduce ideas that are completely acceptable to Chinese culture. Thus, from the perspective of the Chinese field, expatriates who are mid-way in their process of assimilation into Chinese culture would be considered moderate in novelty and usefulness. Their overall creativity, however, peaks at the mid-way point of assimilation as continued and complete assimilation would result in their being assessed as highly useful but low in novelty because of their simultaneous integration into Chinese culture and isolation from their heritage culture. Assessments by the home country field of expatriates' creativity would also change as they continue to assimilate into Chinese culture but for different reasons.

Home country as field. The creativity of an expatriate's work may also be assessed from the perspective of evaluators in the expatriate's home country. The creativity of assimilating expatriates assessed from the heritage culture would show the same reverse U pattern as a function of time, with overall creativity initially increasing and then leveling off and ultimately decreasing. However, this pattern would arise from different dynamics of perceived novelty and usefulness. Expatriates newly arrived in China would still identify strongly with their heritage culture, and would not have yet acquired the mental flexibility associated with enhanced novelty. However, as they spend increasing amounts of time in China and make the mental adjustments necessary for living in the Chinese culture, they would acquire greater mental flexibility, and start adapting from their experiences. From the perspective of an assessor from the heritage culture, the novelty of their ideas would increase as the time spent in China increases. At the same time, being removed from home would mean that the expatriate gradually loses detailed knowledge of what is happening at home, and runs the risk of coming up with novel ideas which are not acceptable back home. In sum, just like the Chinese assessors, home country assessors would see increasing creativity at first followed by diminishing returns and then a decline. Yet, this assessment is undergirded by different changes in perceived novelty and usefulness (see Fig. 2).

These difference processes that explain the increase, plateau, and then decrease in the overall creativity of expatriates suggest three testable propositions:

Proposition 1: As expatriates assimilate into the host (Chinese) culture, the host (Chinese) field will assess them as decreasingly novel but increasingly useful.

Figure 2. Creativity of assimilating expatriates as assessed from the home country perspective



Notes: creativity, overall creativity; N, creativity as novelty; U, creativity as usefulness.

Proposition 2: As expatriates assimilate into the host (Chinese) culture, the home country field will assess them as decreasingly useful but increasingly novel.

Proposition 3: From the perspective of fields in both the host and home cultures, the overall creativity of expatriates will follow an inverse U-shape from the start to the completion of expatriates' assimilation into the host culture.

A different strategy of adaptation is becoming bicultural, which means maintaining simultaneously strong attachments to one's heritage culture and the host culture (Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009). Adopting a bicultural stance inevitably brings the individual into dilemmas where values of the two cultures conflict. Resolving such dilemmas forces biculturals to develop integratively complex thinking, which often becomes a habitual and general cognitive style. As a result, biculturals may avoid the decline in assessed overall creativity that assimilating expatriates may experience in extended expatriate assignments. Moreover, biculturals may have additional advantages in that their creativity comes from their capacity for frame-switching, shifting between the norms of different cultures in response to situational cues (Leung et al., 2008; Mok & Morris, 2010). This leads to our last proposition:

Proposition 4: Expatriates who are biculturals (i.e., identify with both the host and home cultures) will be assessed by both the host and home country fields as high in novelty, usefulness, and overall creativity throughout their expatriate assignment.

It is important to keep in mind that these predictions would apply to observed creativity in organizational settings. A basic premise of the argument presented here is that creativity in organizational settings requires a depth of contextual knowledge that has not been present in existing laboratory studies of creativity. This is particularly true for assessing usefulness. While novelty can be captured to

some extent by divergent thinking tasks, usefulness in organizational settings requires that the idea is both practical and acceptable and this can only be assessed in light of a deep knowledge of the context. Thus, tests of these propositions would require a longitudinal study of expatriates from the start of their expatriation. As the duration of time needed to uncover the process of assimilation or bicultural identity formation is likely to vary depending on individual difference factors, such as prior experience living or working in another culture (Maddux & Galinsky, 2009) or cognitive flexibility (De Dreu et al., 2008), such research would need to follow the same individuals for the length of their expatriate assignments. An alternate methodology would be to conduct cross-sectional research using a sample of expatriates who vary in duration of their expatriate assignment, and presumably, assimilation or bicultural identification, at the time of data collection.

We have suggested that bicultural expatriates would be assessed by the host and home fields as those who are highest in novelty, usefulness, and overall creativity. If organizations fail to recruit or develop such individuals for expatriate assignments, another means by which organizations can reap the benefits of biculturalism is to use teams composed of individuals with different cultural identities.

Creativity Assessment within Multicultural Teams

Most research focusing specifically upon culture's influence upon creativity has focused upon individual creativity. Conceptualizing creativity as a team activity rather than an individual one simplifies some theoretical problems, but creates other problems. One of the critical challenges in achieving overall creativity lies in the balancing of novelty and usefulness. Extremely novel ideas are often not very useful, while focusing too much upon usefulness can limit the novelty of ideas generated (cf. Miron, Erez, & Naveh, 2004). The placement of individuals in teams who identify with different cultures can offer a solution by reducing the challenge individuals face in balancing the divergent thinking needed for novelty with the deep contextual knowledge needed for usefulness.

Creativity as a team outcome requires a consideration of many of the issues which we have discussed, such as the cultural identities of members or the field, host vs. home, which is assessing the creative outcome. Most critically, the team must adopt a single shared conception of creativity, so that there is a common basis for which team members can act to support each others' actions. When creativity is a team outcome, idea generation and idea evaluation can be roles for separate team members, so that some members satisfy the novelty role, while other members specialize in the usefulness role. This suggests that there are distinct aspects of the creative process that could be more efficiently performed through role specialization by team members who come from different cultures. For example, this could occur when a newly arrived Western expatriate member of a team in a local organization in China, with his/her knowledge of current trends in

their work domain in her home country, introduces developments that are novel to the team in China. As he/she does this, local Chinese members of the team, with their deep knowledge of Chinese cultural values and customs, can select or develop the expatriate's ideas so that they are acceptable and useful in the Chinese culture. With this blend of multicultural identities and diversity, both host and home field assessors would judge the overall creativity of the team to be high.

In the same way that identity integration has been proposed as a mechanism through which bicultural individuals are able to simultaneously access and combine ideas from two cultures (Cheng et al., 2008), multicultural teams may require similar developments in order to leverage their diversity for creativity. In the case of cross-cultural dyads, Chua, Morris, and Mor (2010) find that creative collaboration is more likely when individuals are high in cultural metacognitive ability which enables them to more affectively form trusting relationships characterized by greater sharing of new ideas. At the dyad level and the team level, transactive memory systems (Wegner, 1987) might function like identity integration does at the individual level in enabling the combination of ideas from different cultural sources. Research is needed in order to better understand the mechanisms underlying multicultural teams' higher levels of creative performance observed by earlier researchers (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995). Conceptualizing creativity as a multicultural team activity offers multiple avenues of research. One such study could examine the influence of differences in members' cultural identities in teams on transactive memory processes and consequent novelty, usefulness, and overall creativity of the teams.

CONCLUSION

This is an exciting time for researchers examining the relationship between culture and creativity. Research is moving out of educational and laboratory settings, with a growing body of literature examining creativity in organizational settings. We have argued that, as research moves from laboratory studies to organizational studies, there is a need to give greater consideration to contextualizing the measurement of creativity in organizational settings. While there is near universal acceptance of creativity as defined by novelty and usefulness (Amabile, 1982; 1983), organizational studies need to assess these two dimensions independently, and must make explicit the ways in which domains and fields influence these assessments. We introduce a framework for examining cultural experience, creativity criteria, and assessor perspectives on creativity. The propositions we offer stem from our argument that fields in different cultures could reach the same conclusions about an individuals' overall creativity but for different reasons. We extended these arguments to team creativity by suggesting that the creativity benefits of bicultural identification could also be derived from teams composed of individuals with different cultural identifications.

This paper has identified a number of broad avenues for research, including: the processes used by subject matter experts (i.e., fields within a domain) in assessing specific ideas for creativity, the effect of cross-cultural expertise upon creative behaviours, and identifying group design and processes which influence multicultural team creativity. The discussion in this paper has in common across these topics a basic argument that researchers must begin approaching creativity in organizational settings within specific domains, rather than treating it as a context-free activity. We might agree on what it means for something to be creative, but that does not mean we all agree about whether a specific idea is creative. We hope that an understanding of the role of creativity assessment, the focus of this paper, offers a contribution to future research on creativity in organizations and across cultural settings.

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