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THE CULTURALLY COMPETENT CREATIVE IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

In this age of ever increasing global connectivity, it is long past time that our examination of creativity takes into serious account the very powerful effect of culture on our thinking and problem solving. Too long have studies of creativity simply looked at pieces and parts of the creative process without much regard for the complexities, particularly the cultural complexities, of the environment within which this process must play out.

Culturally Complex Environments

Culturally complex environments occur when bodies and minds enter into spaces where they encounter bodies and minds different from their own. Put into simple terms, there is a cognitive disruption because someone else's appearance or behavior is making you pause. Something does not conform to your idea of social norms. In today's world, there are very few spaces that do not fit this criterion. The places in which we exist have become quite diverse, as people take advantage of advances in travel and communication and create cultural identities that are wholly unique. Unfortunately, studies on cultural differences and creativity have been limited, as they often look at binary relationships or generalizations that are not terribly comprehensive (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). This is clearly insufficient as cultural categorizations with rigid boundaries are inherently exclusive, leaving a vast number of identities outside of the borders. However, in terms of creativity, the classifications themselves may not be especially important. While awareness of the many areas where differences arise is necessary, what is crucial is an interpretive framework that allows a person to process and utilize diversity as a tool for creative thinking (Coste, Coste, & Fish, 2013).

Diversity is a term regarded in most fields as positive. In the biological sciences, diversity of individual entities accounts for the basis of evolution and Darwin's survival of the fittest. The areas on the borders of ecosystems contain the greatest amount of biodiversity. Known as the *edge effect*, new and unusual happenings result from the overlap of ecosystems. Although boundaries and borders imply that there is a distinct beginning and end to an area, the falsity of this notion is omnipresent. As another example, let us look at the edge effect as it occurs in societies. Nation states are lines drawn in modern times to contain people, a phenomenon only present in recent history. Those who live on the border of two nations en-

counter the dilemma of finding a sense of self when functioning within two cultures' concurrent existence. It is not that the hybrid culture is invalid, but rather that it is a bastardization of both culture A and culture B, which means that border identities are unlikely to fit neatly into a box of predefined categories.

The observation of this anomaly in cultural studies resulted in the genesis of border theory. An emerging challenge, resulting from the diminishing boundaries of nations and the rise of the cultural nomad, is that society as a whole now exists in a border culture of sorts. Might this greater social diversity act as a catalyst for creative thinking? Can the feeling of being *other* function not as a thing to overcome, but as a cognitively distinct space? Arguably, encounters with the culturally unfamiliar, and the need to reorient, could make for the most possibility saturated environments because they necessarily break the status quo.

For the purposes of our discussion, culture should be understood as the way individuals orient themselves to the spaces and people surrounding them. It is the shared part people refer to when they define culture as a shared set of beliefs and values. Ahmed (2006) writes about orientation as being situated in a space, history, and (of particular interest in terms of cultural complexities) disorientation. Disorientation, to be not oriented, may sound lost or lacking, but these are instances of rich cognitive possibility. These "are moments in which you lose one perspective, but the 'loss' itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object thick with presence" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 158). Thus, the way we respond to disorientation is up to us. In reorienting, we might end up facing an entirely new direction. Jill Johnston, a critic for *The Village Voice*, observes that "the solution to the problem of identity is, get lost" (1998, p. 148). Similarly, the solution to the problem of conventional thinking may be to become disoriented.

The cognitive and physical space of creativity must allow the individual to get lost and to come back changed. As a caution, however, Ooi and Stöber (2011) argue that creativity can be viewed as destructive or destabilizing when it appears unmanageable. Thus, disorientation on its own does not produce desirable outcomes unless it is channeled, managed, into productive creativity. Ooi and Stöber note that creatives who thrive in their environments are those that are "culturally vibrant, tolerant of diversity, and technologically advanced" (2011, p. 114). We suggest that creatives need less training on generating and recognizing difference and more knowledge of how diversity needs to be harnessed to achieve full creative potential.

Research on negotiated cultural difference usually focuses on overcoming diversity; lacking in these discussions is how culturally complex spaces can act as a catalyst for new outcomes. The trick to developing a setting that is producing measurably enhanced creative productivity is in nurturing the right environment to foster this "borderland," where unique experience is almost certainly without fear or hostility. Pluut & Curşeu (2013) examine the role of demographic diversity on

collaborative creativity, and while they hypothesize that exposure to diversity in life will have a positive impact on collaboration in diverse groups, they find that it is actually dependent upon a “preexisting openness to diversity” (p. 22). The authors suggest that the best way to achieve this openness is through focus on “de-categorization and re-de-categorization” rather than “overgeneralization or oversimplification.” Pluut and Curşeu use the term “diverse mindsets” which calls for consistent open-mindedness rather than simple knowledge of common differences. If diversity in a group does indeed bring about more complex and creative outcomes, then how do we craft the mind most open and prepared for these spaces?

Further deconstructing the notion of cultural complexity at its most basic level, Gupta and Ferguson highlight the fact that the “distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures is based upon a seemingly unproblematic division of space, on the fact that they occupy ‘naturally’ discontinuous spaces” (1992, p. 6). On the other hand, there is a large body of work that questions what this means for those who occupy the borderlands of these constructed boundaries, and as was argued earlier, we all find ourselves in borderlands at some point or another as citizens of the global community. One way that Gupta and Ferguson explore this reality is to avoid describing the human condition as occupying borderlands, but rather use a concept taken from Edward Said that brands new identities of homelessness as a way to capture the falsity of unchallenged collective identities. However, this positioning assumes an ability to detach from cultural constructions, when it is much more realistic to accept that there exists a continuous dialogue between multiple collective identities, the discussions of the borderlands.

By resisting assumptions in these hard to pinpoint blurred spaces, one can achieve the open mindedness, the “diverse mindsets” that Pluut and Curşeu identify as a marker of successful utilization of collaborative creativity. Gupta and Ferguson assert that the borderlands may be the new “‘normal’ locale of the postmodern subject” (1992, p. 18). How does the diversification of spaces affect creativity? Clearly, creativity should thrive on the lessening of restrictions and on challenging set ways of living. However, Pluut and Curşeu find that the diversification alone does not guarantee creativity, and Gupta and Ferguson warn that ideas of difference can become even more distinct when examining culturally complex spaces.

It would seem that we must break down our explanation of borderlands further. To do this, an oriented perspective on border theory is particularly helpful. Traveling through the history of border theory, we stop at Renato Rosaldo’s (1993) book *Culture and Truth* in which the ideas of culture and borderlands are presented in terms of “fragmentation, and contestation (as opposed to the exclusivity of shareability, coherence, and uniformity)” (as cited in Lugo, 2005, p. 47). Let us look further at the term *coherence*. Coherence is defined by Merriam Webster as is detailed below:

Coherence: the quality or state of cohering: as

a: systematic or logical connection or consistency

b: integration of diverse elements, relationships, or values

Thus, to be anti-coherence means never becoming completely comfortable. It is about appreciating the discomfort or disorientation. The most powerful potential comes not when a creative becomes acclimated and unphased by difference, but when the disarming nature of diverse thinking and behavior inspires new thought. Although Lugo acknowledges that the emergence of border theory is historically situated and is not inherently more correct than looking at the patterns of communities, border theory does lend us a contestation of our current approach to culture, and disorients us yet again.

As we see it, culturally complex spaces, explored through the lens of border theory, can be the impetus to think of and situate disorientation and creativity as beneficial partners. In his *New York Times* article *How Nonsense Sharpens the Intellect*, Benedict Carey (2009) alludes to how disorientation can be the catalyst for creative thought. Carey's article is derivative of the work of Travis Proulx. In *Connection From Kafka*, Proulx and Heine (2009) conducted a study that had participants in one of two conditions—one that read a nonsensical story and one that did not; subjects in both conditions were asked to find patterns in strings of letters. Those who read the nonsensical story found patterns significantly better than the control group, leading to the conclusion that disorientation can be beneficial for creative thought. Broadening the topic and the theory behind it, Proulx's (2009) *The Feeling of the Absurd* recounts historically the significance and fascination with the absurd, whether in literature, psychology, or other disciplines. Throughout these writings, there is a consistent finding that the deviation from the expected causes one to try and fill in the blanks and return the space to one of sense. Moreover, this can be extrapolated to other tasks at hand, because "whatever experience is the source of senselessness, the same unique arousal state evokes—a 'feeling of the absurd'" (2009, p. 230). This is why a disorienting story can help one find sense in a string of letters. Similarly, a diverse setting of people with atypical behaviors and thoughts will violate our own comfort and can help us discover new channels of creative thought.

The Culturally Competent Creative

Given that culture plays such a strong role in our thinking, it is fortunate that talk of culture is now gaining some traction in the creativity literature. For example, Tsai (2012) describes creativity as a convoluted phenomenon and speaks of the exertion of culture on creativity (which must also work in conjunction with historical, societal, and individual factors). Neelands and Cho (2010) talk about an "English model of creativity" and of the cultural politics of an idea. They argue that the current positioning of creativity in policy discussions reconceptualizes creativ-

ity as a vehicle to address larger socio-political and economic agendas. Farid (2011) speaks of creative youth who are continually dissatisfied with their reality, a dissatisfaction that leads to a reformation of their life cycles. He explores the interactive relationship between creative youth and their type of life, examining the nature of their cultural and social backgrounds and the social and political challenges of their existence.

Furthermore, Glaveanu (2010) argues that understanding creativity means understanding the varied sources of complexity that contribute to a creative event. He states that creativity is simultaneously individual and cultural because individuals themselves are cultural beings. As a consequence, “creative expression is also a form of cultural expression and, ultimately, one of the most illustrative forms of cultural participation: engaging with cultural artifacts to produce new cultural artifacts, employing culture to generate culture” (p. 48). Finally, Glaskin (2011) argues that creativity is “the encultured work of memory” (p. 44).

This emphasis on the importance of culture during the creative process must not be ignored. In fact, recent studies are showing that facility with the cultural aspects of one’s environment is quite critical. For example, Pishghadam & Zabihi (2011) found highly significant correlations between creativity and social competence, social solidarity, literacy, cultural competence, and extraversion. In fact, regression analysis of their data showed that a combination of cultural competence and social solidarity was the best predictor of creativity, explaining 25% of the variance in subjects’ creativity scores.

Cohen’s (2012) work gives us another look at the fit between individuals and their surroundings, the interplay between creativity and person, culture, and environment. Obviously, a creator must be aware of cultural values and not overstep these boundaries for work to be accepted. However, Cohen goes beyond a simple exploration of acceptance finding to posit a scenario in which the individual adapts to external conditions, but that adaptation can also mean moving from one environment to another more suitable, or even forcing the environment to adapt in response to creative efforts. Obviously, culture impacts creativity by limiting acceptable boundaries, but it also provides the artifacts used in creating. Cohen argues a developmental continuum of adaptive, creative behaviors suggesting “a shift from individual adaptation to the environment to adaptation by the world to the individual” (p. 4).

Thus it is that we must now think of the creative process not in terms of pieces and parts—what creativity facilitation tool is best, what managerial style best enhances creative potential—but in terms that seriously take into account the cultural complexity that we all must function within. As Hokanson & Karlson (2013) state, we must speak of the necessity of developing “rich” knowledge so as to persevere in the face of challenge. This does not mean simply more knowledge but rather better knowledge. In this era in which technology has made information

much more accessible, we must also contend with the fact that the information we receive may be much more homogenized. Hokanson & Karlson (2013) argue that creativity and grit will be the distinguishing character strengths for the global workforce of our new “knowmadic” world.

Bilton (2010) notes that perception of creativity has shifted from that which is deviant to that which is “manageable” in mainstream management theory and practice. He argues that the individualistic “heroic” model of creativity is being replaced by a more collective “structural” model that highlights the systems and infrastructure around individual creativity rather than focusing on one person’s raw talent. And this is good news. It is only when organizational infrastructures enable creativity and celebrate difference that the sparks found on the borderlands of culture can ignite and stay lit.

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Tara Grey Coste is a Leadership and Organizational Studies professor at the University of Southern Maine. Her work focuses on refining the training processes that enhance creativity in teams and on teaching business professionals techniques to

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