

Implicit Theories of Creativity in Hong Kong Chinese Population

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Most research on creativity has been concentrating on conception and testing of what might be referred to as explicit theories of creativity. Much less research attention, however, has been devoted to the investigation on what might be referred to as implicit theories of creativity. Since implicit theories do in fact serve as the basis of informal everyday training and assessment, their importance should not be overlooked. This paper presents methodology as well as preliminary results of the first stage of indigenous empirical study exploring ideas about creativity held by the Hong Kong Chinese. The data were collected from 370 respondents approached at the railway stations using a set of open ended questions, most appropriate for studying given implicit concepts. A comprehensive list of behaviours characteristic of creativity has been constructed.

Research Background

The role of culture in human development cannot be overemphasized.

The nature of a given culture shapes the cognitive, social and emotional processes of the people within that culture who in turn develop responses adapted to their specific cultural milieu. While acknowledging the cultural differences we also find developmental regularities and similarities in all human beings. As an anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn said, "... every person is like all other people, like some other people, and like no other people." (Ripple, 1983, p.10). Therefore psychological investigations aiming at the development of universal (etic) concepts need to, at first, take a culture specific (emic) approach before any generalizations can be made.

Unfortunately our contemporary psychology is a culturally unbalanced discipline whose historical roots, both in terms of theory and methodology are predominantly Western. These Western theories, concepts and methods have been generalized by non-Western psychologists and put to use without proper adaptation to the Western emic (culture specific) approach has a universal (etic) value. Consequently,

psychologists in the East started replications of methods and studies done in the West. As a result Western psychology for the Chinese, the Indian or the South Americans has been booming at the expense of the indigenous psychology of such communities. Years of practising Western psychology in culturally, socially and very often politically different climates has brought some disappointment with the discipline and frustration to its "followers". As a result more reflection and caution have developed in the process of transferring foreign concepts into culturally different communities. More innovative research has started aiming at developing of psychological concepts at emic (culture specific) level. Some examples of such approaches in south East Asia are the attempts made by Mataragnon(1979), Kvan (1983) and Chan, J. (1987) on the theoretical level and by Dunn et al. (1988), Chan, J.W.C. and Vernon (1988), Bond and Pang (1991) on the empirical level. For example the empirical data arising from Bond and Pang's (1991) research on values revealed that despite the many similarities between the Chinese and the Westerners part of the Chinese Value spectrum is not accessible through the use of Western

instruments. Therefore we need to recognize that similarity does not necessarily mean identity. The real challenge of inter-culturally bounded psychology lies in the resourceful exploration of various cultural heritages. Wholesale importation of ideas, theories and concepts which are essentially alien to a given culture may lead to an incomplete, even distorted understanding of people from other cultures. To avoid this we need to free ourselves from Western conceptualizations and instruments and search for the indigenous roots of certain psychological concepts such as intelligence, creativity, values, etc. Such an approach would provoke critical thought and would allow a creative synthesis of Western psychology with Eastern ideas thus leading us away from an essentially culture bound psychology and towards a more universal one.

Mataragnon (1979) proposes two approaches towards indigenous research in psychology. The first one starts at the etic level with a construct that appears to be universal and then develops indigenous (emic) ways of understanding and measuring it. The second one starts completely on emic (indigenous level) and draws parallels for assimilation at the etic (universal) level. Researchers

adopting that approach do not refer to work that has arisen out of any other cultural tradition than the particular one they are analyzing. They consult constructs, theories and informants from the culture they are studying. Instead of consulting academic psychology they will rather consult local literary material, colloquial expressions, proverbs and sayings used in different places and by different local groups.

Implicit and Explicit Theories of Creativity

Concept of creativity can be described either through explicit theories, developed by social scientists, and based on theoretically derived hypotheses or through implicit theories. The latter are derived from individuals' belief system and reside in the minds of these individuals. These implicit theories should be of interest to psychologists since they: (1) help to understand what people in a given community mean by creativity, (2) act as standards against which creative behaviors are informally judged and assessed, (3) serve as the basis for training in the area of creativity, (4) can indicate which aspects of creative behavioral need to be understood but

are overlooked in the available explicit theories of creativity (Stenberg et al. 1981; Runco and Bahleda, 1987; Runco, 1990; Runco et al. 1993).

Implicit theories of such concepts as intelligence, creativity, morality or happiness can differ across cultures. It can be noticed, for example, how differently creativity and originality are expressed in Chinese poetry, paintings, sculpture, music or even cuisine as compared with European or North American equivalents. These differences, however, may not be visible to a researcher who imports Western theories, concepts and methodology to study Chinese creativity.

The differences between the Chinese and Western perspective may relate not only to the expression of creativity but also to the interpretation of creative behaviour. What a Chinese parent or teacher has classified and accepted as creative behavior can differ from that of a North American or European parent or teacher. Therefore it seems unfair to import a particular concept and its measuring instrument from one culture into another and subsequently draw conclusions that the representatives of the other culture are either more or less intelligent, happy or creative.

Methodology

The presented data are preliminary and result from the first stage of a larger research project. The first stage aimed at:

- (1) exploring ideas about creativity held by the Hong Kong Chinese adult population,
- (2) developing list of behaviours as well as characteristics considered as creative or representative for creativity in Hong Kong Chinese culture,
- (3) finding out who from the contemporary eminent Hong Kong personalities is considered outstanding for creativity participants.

There were 370 subjects involved in the first stage of the study.

The subjects were approached by interviewers at the MIR (subway) and the KCR (train) stations located in the different parts of Hong Kong:

Causeway Bay, Hung Hom, Mong Kok, Kowloon Tong and Tsuen Wan. Age of the subjects was in the range from 18-71 years (three subjects whose age was 17 were eliminated from the study). They represented a cross-section of educational levels from primary two to university. There was almost an equal number of females (N=180) and males

(N=187).

Materials and procedure

Subjects received a questionnaire, In Chinese, inviting them to give 'his/her own opinion' and view on "creativity". They were assured that there is no right or wrong answer and that each own view is appreciated. The subjects wrote down the answer in the space provided below the open question. In a few cases the Interviewer recorded the answer on the request of the subject. In this presentation the answers given to the following two open questions and one request are discussed and analyzed:

- (1) What is creativity?
- (2) How can you describe a creative person?
- (3) Name Hong Kong person(s) outstanding for creativity.

Results and Discussion

The first question "what is creativity?" elicited 819 answers which belonged into 95 different categories out of which 69 categories were named by more than one respondent. The further qualitative analysis will, however, concentrate on the categories named by 7 or more

respondents which includes 13 categories and 645 answers.

The two most frequent groups of responses embodied the concept of "something" e.g. question, idea, product, and behavioral that is "new". "non existing before" or an act of creation, "create" (see Table 1).

Almost 36% of the responses used for analysis fell into these two categories. The answers which stressed the element of "uniqueness" or "out of ordinary" as indicators of creativity, 59 answers or 9.15%, are closely related to the first two categories. Creativity was also identified with "thought", "idea", and process of "thinking" which was described by some respondents as abstract, unlimited, non-traditional, and outstanding. This category included 103 answers or 15.9%. To some respondents creativity meant "capability" or "ability" which once more related to "creation", "making things", "producing ideas", "innovating". In Chinese the word "creativity" literally means the ability to create, therefore it comes as no surprise that 83 answers and 12.87% fell into this category. Creativity was also connected with "imagination" (36 or 5.58% answers), "change of breakthrough" (33 or 5.12%), "potential or power" (30

or 4.65%), and "self-expression" (19 or 2.95%). Only 7 answers (1.08%) connected creativity with "art".

According to Hocevar (1981) the most popular definition of creativity is "divergent thinking" which broadly refers to the ability to respond with unusual, but appropriate, responses to problems. The response which referred to the uniqueness of creative thought, the orientation on "change" or "breakthrough", and the tendency "not to follow" others seem to belong to that category.

In addition to hinging upon the literal meaning of creativity, most identified "new", "unique", the production of "thoughts". and "imagination". Fayer and collings (1991) surveyed a thousand British teachers on their view of creativity, most of them suggested creativity involved "imagination", the production of "original ideas", and "self-expression". When compared with the results of these two studies the Chinese put more stress on "novelty", "uniqueness", and "ability to create". They hardly used expression "originality" to describe creativity, while "self-expression" was noted only in 19 answers (2.95%).

The second question "How can you describe a creative person?" generated

847 different responses which fell into 99 categories. The categories named by less than 7 respondents (1.69%) were dropped out and as a result 33 categories and 699 responses were subject to further qualitative analysis.

Most of the respondents described a creative person as being "smart" and "intelligent" (51), having "new ideas" (75), or as being "imaginative" (56), see Table 2. In Runco's (1990) study on implicit concept of artistic, scientific, and everyday creativity, "intelligent" was the most often mentioned characteristic of scientific creativity while "imaginative" was used for the artistic one. In our study of Hong Kong subjects the other personal qualities such as "courage", "vitality/active", "independence", "outstanding", "determination", and "willing to try" were also mentioned. These personal characteristics can be referred to as "creativity related skills" (Amabile and Tighe, 1993). In the Runco's (1990) study of teachers and parents implicit theories of creativity such characteristics as "innovative", "challenging", "independent", "active", "unique", "determined" were also observed. The most obvious characteristics of creative person which came out in the Runco's (1990) study, which however did not occur in ours,

were "artistic", "flexible", "questioning", and "humorous". While in our study of the Hong Kong Chinese subjects a creative person was identified as one who has some collectivistic orientation: "inspire people", "has contribution to progress of society", "is appreciated by others", "attracts / interesting person". These characteristics although very unique to the Chinese people (Bond & Hwang, 1991) are also highly valued in Chinese society.

Overall, the results presented in Table 2 indicate that a creative person is the most often described by our subjects by intellectual qualities, viz 222 responses or 31.76%. A creative person is also perceived as the one who has some new and innovative ideas, viz 113 responses or 16.17%. The third most often mentioned group of characteristics identified with a creative person could be referred to as the ability to achieve goals: "boldness", "courage", "determination", 110 responses or 15.74% fell into this category. "Imagination" and "fantasy" was fourth (56 or 8.01%), "active and willing" was fifth (52 or 7.44%) and pro-social characteristics was sixth (42 or 6.01%).

The request "Name Hong Kong person outstanding for creativity" was

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Responses to the Question:
"What is creativity?"

category	number	%
New, non existing before (e.g. ideas, thoughts, things & products, inventions, innovations, questions, trials)	122	18.91
Create, create something out of nothing (e.g. give life, invent, design, make something unpredictable, construct: special things, ideas)	109	16.90
Thoughts, thinking (e.g. abstract idea, idea, different personal, outstanding)	103	15.96
Ability to, capable to (e.g. create, compose, make things or ideas, innovate, think, develop)	83	12.87
Unique (e.g. never been thought before, unprecedented, out of ordinary, unexpected)	59	9.15
Imagination	36	5.58
Expressing own and having own (e.g. ideas, knowledge, concept, way, style, opinion, thoughts, imagination, feelings)	33	5.12
Change, breakthrough (e.g. new from old, reconstruct, reform, changing concept into reality, change things)	33	5.12
Power, energy, potential (e.g. human, personal, to design, to see things differently)	30	4.65
Will not follow (e.g. general principles, regulations, others, free rain, starts from scratches)	15	2.33
Problem solving and researching	15	2.33
Art	7	1.08

Table 2. Number and percentage of Responses outstanding for creativity who to the Request: "Name Hong Kong person outstanding for creativity"

Profession	Number	%
Businessmen	58	22.7
Fashion Designers	38	14.9
Politicians	31	12.2
Film Directors	22	8.6
Actors	20	7.8
Architects & Interior Designers	20	7.8
Writers	14	5.5
Song Composers/musicians	11	4.3
Singers	8	3.0
Media Professionals	9	3.5
Artists	4	1.6
Scientists	4	1.6
People awarded for inventions	3	1.2
Single odd nomination: God, my boss, husband, teacher, philosopher, sex educator, children, students	9	3.5

answered by 255 responses (69.5%). Almost 30% of the subjects were unable to provide any name. The given answers were grouped into 15 categories representing different professional groups. Separate categories were assigned for the "single odd nominations", "unknown names", and "people awarded for inventions". Almost 50% of our respondents suggested a person

outstanding for creativity who belonged to the group of "businessmen" (58 respondents or 22.7%), "fashion designers" (38 respondents or 14.9%), or "politicians" (31 respondents or 12.2%), see Table 3. Film directors (22 or 8.6%), actors (20 or 7.8%) and architects/interior designers (20 or 7.8%) came next. Artists and scientist came the very last in the nominations.

Hong Kong, as a British crown colony, is famous for its economic and financial success is the South East Asia. Most of the people have been working extremely hard (long hours, six or even seven days a week with one week of holidays a year) and had very little time for cultural life of hobbies. Therefore they seem to be pragmatically oriented and when "the successful people" are considered they nominate the ones who have achieved a financial success and as such well known to the community. The highest single nomination belongs to the Director of Cheong Kong Ltd, Mr Li Ka Shing (23), the Governor of Hong Kong Mr. Chris Patten (16), and Mr. Eddie Lau, the fashion designer.

In conclusion we would like to stress that the data presented are the preliminary ones and further analysis needs to be done to determine how the

implicit concept of creativity of Hong Kong Chinese depends on certain demographic variables such as age, sex and educational level. More analysis will also be carried out to explain the interplay between the implicit theories held by Hong Kong Chinese and the explicit ones.

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