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## Children and creativity: A most (un)likely pair?

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This article addresses the question of whether children are or are not creative by exploring the assumptions underlying each possible answer. It is argued that our position regarding children's creativity steams from larger systems of representation concerning children on the one hand, and creativity on the other. Arguments for and against the idea that children can be creative are then considered from four different perspectives: the product, process, person and press factor. On the whole, children's creativity is accounted for in terms of a particular 'reading' of children as active and interactive beings and of creativity as a social and cultural phenomenon. In contrast, children's lack of creative expression is linked with a passive and receptive image of the child and with theorising creativity through the lenses of the genius and of great creations. In the end, the benefits of acknowledging children's creativity are considered for child and developmental psychology, for creativity research and for educational practices.

Key-words: children, creativity, culture, development

*"Electricity is not only present in a magnificent thunderstorm and dazzling lightning, but also in a lamp; so also, creativity exists not only where it creates great historical works, but also everywhere human imagination combines, changes, and creates anything new" (Vygotsky, 1930/1967, cited in Smolucha, 1992, p. 54)*

It could come as a surprise maybe for some that the connection between children and creativity can end in a question mark. Children play, sing, dance, draw, tell stories and make up riddles in such a natural, spontaneous and creative way that it goes without saying that there is such a thing as 'children's creativity'. In fact, some would argue, children are the mere *embodiment* of human creativity. In a recent survey of laypeople's representations of creativity (Author, under review), respondents were asked to rate and comment on different symbols that can potentially represent the essence of being creative. Findings revealed that 'children's drawings' for example was found by most participants to be a good or very good creativity symbol. A variety of reasons were offered for why this was the case, and among them the idea repeatedly came up that "the child within all of us is the part which longs to create

and come up with answers to all things". In the collective imaginary (of people from the Western world and our present day at least) there seems to be a strongly held conviction that children are much more free and creative in their expression than adults. This theme has been well reflected in psychology too, in the work of several distinguished authors. Freud (1908/1970) himself compared the playing child with the creative writer. And yet, these kinds of understandings need to be historically situated. As Gardner (1982) rightfully pointed out, in centuries past, the association between children and art would have been easily dismissed. For it is "our romantic tradition, remolded in terms of a modernist ethos, [that] has made us responsive to the notion of the child as artist, and the child in every artist" (Gardner, 1982, p. 92). Can this tradition be said to mould contemporary psychology as well?

The proper answer here would be 'yes and no'. Yes if we look at today's growing literature dedicated to measuring the 'creative potential' of children, its ups and downs through different developmental stages, the practical ways in which it could be enhanced, etc. At a theoretical level though there is considerable *scepticism* whether creativity, as defined by modern science, can be applied to children and the reasons for this are not altogether dismissible. To continue with Gardner's (1982, p. 142) analysis of the child and her art, he cautiously remarked that experimental evidence does not support the "easy assumption that the young child is an artist". Feldman, another acclaimed developmentalist and creativity researcher, warned at some point (in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 219) about the tendency to 'romanticise childhood' by exaggerating the creative value of children's products. Equally reserved, Duke stated that children 'art' can't be called creative; it is "the first step of a creative process, but few children go beyond this first step in a journey that may demand 10 or 100 steps" (Duke, 1973, p. 8). What transpires here is the way in which a common-sense truism can trouble psychologists. The taken-for-grantedness of children's creativity doesn't seem to hold its ground when scientific definitions and methods are trying to unpack it. In the end, it is questionable whether children can live up to, little less embody, the traditional idealised image of what it means to be 'truly' creative.

The notion of creativity in both science and common-sense thinking draws on a powerful legacy of the '*genius*' or the '*Great Creator*'. The history of this concept is ridden by dichotomies between creative and uncreative, extraordinary and ordinary, exceptional and banal, art or science and everyday life, art and craft, and so on. There are strong ideological barriers safeguarding the realm of creativity against those who are deemed unable of 'true' creative expression. Among these we generally find all animals, the mad, and children. As Feldhusen (2002, p. 179) notes, "creativity is a phenomenon that is most often and successfully researched and understood at its high level, less frequently as exhibited by average people and/or children". At best, children can be given a secondary role, at the periphery of creative expression, and be

acknowledged for their “low-range creativity” (Feldman in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 219). This is furthermore suggested by distinctions such as those between ‘mature’ and ‘mundane’ creativity (see Cohen and Ambrose, 1999, p. 9). The first type is the most valuable, leading to the transformation of a field and, as its name implies, it is reserved for adulthood. The second, also named ‘creativity in the small’, brings about the new at an individual, not societal level. Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising how a debate between scholars about the impact of society on children’s natural creativity ended with the following conclusion:

“We came to a consensus that children are not really creative, given the definitions of creativity that are necessary to explain the important and influential innovations that have impacted our lives. Some of us are willing to retain a residual notion of small *c* creativity – the everyday cleverness that makes us smile or makes life easier – for the novel, unusual actions of children, but we all distinguish this from big *C* Creativity, the creation of culture-transforming products that is found only in adults” (Sawyer in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 240).

This article aims to challenge such a conclusion. It will do so not by engaging with particular pieces of empirical data or by claiming the falseness of separating children and creativity. On the contrary, this view will be considered as legitimate in its own right. What the present paper will examine are the *epistemological reasons* for supporting and/or contesting children’s creativity, considering them as symptomatic of deep-seated assumptions concerning children and creativity. From a constructionist standpoint, both sides of the debate are equally ‘valid’ in their efforts to convince us of a certain ‘reality’. Nevertheless, they have important practical consequences (for theory, for research, for education, etc.) and as such cannot and should not be equally supported. Some will undoubtedly be outraged by the perspective of considering the ‘constructed’ nature of our science, be it developmental or creativity psychology, and of raising (or perhaps lowering) the discussion from the level of facts to that of narratives about facts. To those I respond with Jerome Bruner’s reflection that “*any* story we tell about human infancy grows as much out of ideological convictions and cultural beliefs as out of observation” (Bruner, 1986, p. 134). There is great value in scrutinising these ideological convictions and cultural beliefs since, in our case, the ‘stories’ we tell about children’s creativity are born out of ‘stories’ we tell about children and about creativity in themselves. As such, the presentation will start with a brief consideration of these ‘background narratives’. Following this, a review of arguments for why children are (or are not) creative will be offered, paying particular attention to how this debate both steams from and informs contemporary shifts in developmental psychology and creativity research. Finally, and in light of this analysis, the case will be made for why we should ‘bet’ on children’s creativity as the more fertile starting point for a contemporary perspective on children, creativity, and education.

## ***1. Making sense of children and childhood***

Usually one thinks of making sense as something we engage in when we are confronted with an alien and mysterious reality. This description applies to a great extent to our efforts to know the human child, despite the fact that we all were one to begin with. Beautifully capturing this paradox, Kennedy (2008, p. 1) writes: "Childhood is both the most deeply familiar moment of the human life cycle and the great unknown". The fact that we were once children, but we are not anymore, doesn't make much easier the task of comprehending childhood *as it is*. Our knowledge of it will always be bound to our position in the world in relation to it, as adults. The adultcentrism of our theories is a characteristic that is here to stay and something we can't correct but should more consistently acknowledge. The child is, in the end, simultaneously a historical, cultural, political, economic, social, and scientific production (Denzin, 1977). Definitions of childhood, as Burman (1994) observes, are always relational in nature, making reference to parents, families, the State, etc. Moreover, they are never inconsequential for how we come to define ourselves as non-children. As Burman (1994, p. 48) continues to argue, "discourses of childhood (...) are part of the cultural narratives that define who we are, why we are the way we are and where we are going".

Unsurprisingly, childhood as a "social invention" (Valentine, 2004, p. 2) has a history, one that is more recent than what we commonly believe. In his seminal work on historical representations of children and childhood, Ariès (1962) demonstrated that this particular age was 'absent' as a concept in the Middle Ages and only started emerging in the upper classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of course children existed before that time but they were not seen as such, but rather like miniature adults. And even after they finally 'materialised', children went through a series of different 'incarnations' before becoming the complex beings they are (considered) today. From the innocent and pure creature of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to the emblematic sign of Romanticism in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and up to the instinctual and sexual organism of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalysis, the child transformed in unison with the social, cultural and political worldviews of the time. As David Kennedy (2006, p. 5) concludes: "Caught between divinity and animality, between what is and what it might be, it is the child who mediates the human possibility". Indeed, children represent a space of possibility, a space of projection and constant re-presentation for all adult 'outsiders'.

What is projected onto the child is not always positive though. As a matter of fact, there is a pervasive tendency, arguably across historical times and geographical places, to define children *in negative terms*: not by what they are and have, but by what they are not and don't have yet (Alanen, 1990, p. 16). And there are many things

adults (psychologists included) consider the child not to have. Analysing dominant conceptions, Vygotsky (1987, p. 53) made the same observation, pointing to how research is absorbed by an ethos of finding the “flaws, inadequacies, and limitations” of the child’s thinking, rather than her capabilities. In the words of D’Alessio (1990, p. 70), “the idea of the unfinishedness of the child has long provided the basis for theories of child development”. This conception stands at the basis of what can be called a ‘*deficit model*’ (see Shaw, 1996) of the child, one portraying children as less able, less developed and less experienced. Obviously, this calls for a comparison term and the comparison term is always the adult. Prout and James (1997) explored the roots of this general dichotomy and its associated symbolism. What this revealed is a general opposition between children as ‘nature’, ‘simple’, ‘amoral’, ‘asocial’ and ‘person-in-waiting’ and adults as ‘culture’, ‘complex’, ‘moral’, ‘social’, and ‘personhood’; in other words, a dichotomy between children’s ‘becoming’ and adult’s ‘being’.

And yet, psychology has come a long way in how it conceptualises children and childhood as a stage of development. From a traditional image of the passive and responsive child, especially at very low ages, theory has gradually moved to a depiction of the “informationally active, socially interactive infant mind” (Bruner, 1999, p. 230). A regained appreciation for the child’s capacity to understand and manipulate the world, to act both towards the self and others, and generally to go beyond the ‘here and now’ of experience, was prompted by current investigations of the *symbolic function* and its genesis. This is not a new interest but one that remained dormant under decades of behaviourism. The focus on the symbolic function is by no means irrelevant for our discussion of children’s creativity. In fact, the story of ‘creativity’ is largely considered to begin with the first symbolically mediated actions of the child:

“Unlike other animals and unlike the infant during the first year of life, the child of two has clearly entered the realm of symbolic activity. (...) He may eat symbolically, using pretense gestures and pretend food. Moreover, such symbolic enactments are carried out seemingly for the sheer enjoyment of representational activity. There is no ulterior motive – unless one wants to count increased knowledge of the world and more effective communication about it. Needless to stress, this achievement of symbolic activity is enormous – in a sense, the greatest imaginative leap of all. Upon it will be constructed all subsequent forms of play, including play of literary imagination” (Gardner, 1982, p. 170).

In conclusion, our historical and societal relationship to the ‘child’ – transcending the specifics of our interactions with particular children – was and continues to be marked by *ambivalence* (see Sommerville, 1982, p. 288). Children are, it seems, innocent, vulnerable and lovable, but they can also be disrupting, menacing and unpredictable (Burman, 1994; Valentine, 2004). As such, they require education, protection and a

watchful surveillance on the part of the adult. A similar ambivalence can be said to describe our understanding of children's creativity. Whether children are indeed creative or not, whether being creative is good or not for them, it is hard to evaluate without uncovering the second piece of the puzzle: the meaning of creativity.

## ***2. Making sense of creators and creativity***

Creativity can be regarded as another 'great unknown' for both scientists and laypeople. Explaining how novelty comes about is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks psychologists are facing, and this is even more so if this novelty is generated by children. Despite all the potential interpretations one can give to the terms 'creative' and 'creativity', there is today a surprisingly high consensus in the literature that creative products are new and "accepted as tenable or useful or satisfying by a group in some point in time" (Stein, 1953, p. 311). It is also what Weinger (2010, p. 51) referred to as 'creativity 1', the playfulness of coming up with new ideas, and 'creativity 2', focused on creating something of value. This double criterion of *originality and value* constitutes the core of a scientific approach to creativity but it is important not to forget that, behind its relative simplicity, one can find a complex history of thinking about creation, from Antiquity onwards (see Sternberg and Lubart, 1999). Of course, the term 'creativity' itself has been with us for a considerably shorter period of time and has gained widespread usage only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the enthusiasm for what it means can be said to have emerged fully, in the Western society at least, after the half of the last century (see Weiner, 2000).

It is hard to summarise centuries of thought on creativity and this will not even be attempted here. What needs to be highlighted though is the fact that explanations for both the capacity to generate novelty and the appreciation for it varied according to historical times, reflecting the main concerns and conceptions of the day. If in pre-Renaissance the notion of creation was associated strictly with God and creative work was linked to divine inspiration, the ages that followed started forging a deep connection between creativity and genetic inheritance (Dacey, 1999, p. 310). Two broad models of creativity gradually emerged, supported by the zeitgeist of Romanticism and, respectively, the Enlightenment (see also Liep, 2001). The *artist* and the *scientist*, the two classical faces of the 'creator', have shaped and continue to shape our collective imaginary of what it means to be a creative person. Importantly for our argument here, the modern admiration for art and science as high forms of human achievement has largely been built on a separation between them and the processes of everyday living (see Dewey, 1934, for a discussion about art). Children's creative expression, an intrinsic part of the latter, also pales in comparison to the breakthroughs of acclaimed artists and prolific scientists.

This leads us to the conclusion that there are many possible 'readings' of creativity and they can be found equally in scientific and popular discourses. The most prominent of these, spread across historical times up to the present day, steams from an association between creativity and *genius*. The towering figure of the genius, with its overtones of "individuality, insight, outstanding ability and, in particular, fertility" (Mason, 2003, p.111), largely contributed to the rupture mentioned above between 'creating' and 'living'. Geniuses are rare, they are special, they stand apart from society and their role is to revolutionise it, to radically change our perspective of the world, usually for the better. The vast majority of us (children included in their totality), cannot aspire to this. Nevertheless, the paradigm of the genius did not remain unchallenged. The psychology of the 1950s contributed greatly to imposing a new perspective on creativity, one in which each and every individual is creative (albeit to different degrees) and this capacity we are born with can and should be educated. Under this vision children gained their 'right' to creativity, however modest its expression might be. Still, the mainstream psychological theory of creativity, for as progressive as it seems compared to the claustrophobic vision of the genius, on the whole failed to acknowledge the social and cultural embeddedness of creative work. Creativity does not spur from nowhere (as in the case of the genius), or from the individual alone (as cognitive models propose), but exists *in between* self and others, creator and audience, individual and community. The We-paradigm of creativity (see Glăveanu, 2010a), gaining momentum in contemporary debates, considers creativity a collaborative and intersubjective enterprise.

To summarise, creativity is a second term enjoying a very rich legacy of meanings and interpretations. The most pervasive of them until now has been the genius approach, a 'romantic model' (Sefton-Green, 2000, p. 220) rooted in the exceptional creative powers of the (male and adult) creator. More 'cultural' readings of creativity, on the other hand, strive to reconnect it with the processes of everyday community life. The notion of children's creativity is just one of the many points of fracture between these two approaches. To understand better the arguments of both sides we need to have a closer and more systematic look at what qualifies children as creative, or uncreative.

### ***3. The creative child? Junctions and disjunctions***

To organise our inquiry into if and why children can be considered creative, the following discussion will be built around the 'canonical' *four Ps* of creativity theory and research: Product, Process, Person and Press (or 'pressure'; the environment, mostly social but not exclusively). Originally established by Rhodes (1961/1987), this framework and its categories are widespread and have the advantage of structuring a rather multifaceted phenomenon. On the downside, as Barron (1995, p. 32) noticed, a strict separation between product, process and person can only be an oversimplification,

since in reality the three stand as interconnected in every creative activity. For the purposes of our analysis though, this particular segmentation helps accentuate two contrasting notions of children and creativity and their immediate implications.

### 3.1. *The product perspective*

As previously noticed, our contemporary psychology of creativity is founded on the study of creative products. This focus on products is justifiable from a scientific perspective: products – like paintings, inventions, mathematical demonstrations, designer objects, and so on – are readily available for evaluation, even measurement. Their originality is there to be observed and judged and their value becomes apparent when products are incorporated in current social practices. ‘Creative’ products are *original* in the sense that there is a distance between them and what (we know) existed before them. They have an air of spontaneity, novelty, and generate surprise and curiosity in their viewers. From this perspective at least, children’s productions can be catalogued as creative. The way young children depict the world, especially at a pre-school age, is a constant source of amazement and delight for parents and teachers, for adults as a whole. Their ‘freshness’ of perspective, their ‘boldness’ in breaking with realism and ‘easiness’ to disregard social conventions makes children’s drawings, for example, a perfect illustration of what ‘creativity’ really is. It is no wonder then that the great Pablo Picasso allegedly said "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child". Modern art, in its present form, greatly embraces child-like playfulness and experimentation.

And yet we have virtually no child artists, in the sense Picasso was. Children may draw and paint and tell stories but their drawings and stories, enmeshed in the flow of everyday life, are easily lost and have no particular *value* for society. At best, children come to ‘re-invent’ things or ideas we already have and know. Except for the micro-universe of the child and her family, children’s expression is worthless at a historical scale. And the historical scale is, as we well remember from before, one crucial point of focus for ‘romantic’ or ‘genius’ readings of creativity (Stein, 1953, p. 311). Even when ‘child geniuses’ are discovered, as examples of extreme giftedness, their present works are appreciated in anticipation of future greater achievement, presumably reserved for when they become adults (prophecies that are seldom turned into reality...). On the whole though, much of what ‘ordinary children’ do and say is never really captured in the form of tangible products and, even when this is the case, it is rarely that these products survive the day.

This raises a very interesting point of reflection for creativity researchers. If we restrict creativity to products we are bound to miss out on much of what creativity is or can be. Not only is the case that creativity commonly manifests itself as a process, but also that

attempts at inferring the creative process from product alone are bound to be as successful as trying to turn fossils into living and breathing creatures. The 'product bias' (Runco, 2007, p. 384) needs to be more consistently addressed and there are signs of clear dissatisfaction with it. Researchers such as Keith Sawyer (2000) have been pointing for several years to the importance of *performance and improvisation*. This line of inquiry would presumably be much more fertile for recognising and understanding children's creativity and not only. In the words of Sawyer:

"Because performance, particularly in the more improvisational genres, is ephemeral and does not generate any lasting ostensible product, it has been easy to neglect. Even though performance has rarely been a subject for creativity research, it may actually represent a more common, more accessible form of creativity than privileged domains such as the arts and sciences. If one recognizes that all social interactions display improvisational elements, then everyday activities such as conversations also become relevant to creativity theory" (Sawyer, 1997, p. 2).

### 3.2. *The process perspective*

In the previous section it was suggested that a process rather than a product orientation would be much more adequate for our understanding of creativity, including the creativity of children and ordinary people. And yet, upon closer scrutiny, how sure are we that children's internal and external processes and activities can be catalogued as 'creative'? On the surface at least there seem to be clear *parallels* between the child's play and the creator's work. Gardner (1982, p. 90), for instance, pointed to several reasons why child and artist belong to the same category. On the one hand the enjoyment of the task is obvious in both cases, and also a willingness to disregard common conventions. Also, both children and artists, as well as creators at large, employ a series of means allowing them to comprehend and express ideas and emotions. Engel (1993) advocated for a similar position referring to the expressiveness of children's play and the experiential aspect of being creative. The discovery of the fact that blue and yellow make up green is accompanied by the same intense emotions that adult creators have in their famous Eureka moments. And yet, many of these points, as the authors who formulate them acknowledge, are open to contestation. Does a child's enjoyment come from the real awareness of what she has created? Does her apparent disregard of norms and traditions reflect any knowledge of what this means? Is the experience of invention understood the same?

All of these questions point to one major aspect that seems to characterise the adult's creative process but not the child's, and that is *intentionality*. In the general literature on creativity this aspect, implying goal-direct and conscious action, is gaining more

and more interest. Creativity, many claim, needs to integrate the intentional aspect otherwise we would be left with considering dreams or accidents as creative, which sounds unacceptable. As Weisberg (1993, p. 243) clearly states, “novelty brought about by accident would not qualify as creative, no matter how valuable the outcome”. He emphasises this point to the extent of proposing that ‘goal-directed novelty’ should be integrated in our conventional definition of creativity. This is also supported by authors like Gruber and Wallace (1999, p. 94), who see a complete definition of creative products as adding purpose and duration to the traditional novelty and value criteria. The consequences for children’s creativity and not only seem clear enough. The “scribbling with crayon on paper of a monkey”, the “random banging on a piano of an infant” and “the free-associational ‘words-salads’ of the schizophrenic” are to be disregarded by creativity researchers (Weisberg, 1993, p. 243). Reviewing some critiques of the idea of children’s imaginative capacities, Gardner (1982) enumerates: lack of control, of deliberate intention and of the ability to select among alternatives. In conclusion: “from this point of view, children’s *apparently* imaginative activities are best written off as happy accidents” (Gardner, 1982, p. 169).

Once again, on the surface, this association between intentionality and creativity seems legitimate but what it betrays is an implicit assumption that human beings are *rational and goal-directed* thinkers and creators. The myth of the ‘Great Creator’, embarked on a large-scale project to revolutionise science, art, and society, planning ahead and being all-knowing of the details and implications of *his* actions doesn’t actually pass the test of empirical evidence. As it turns out, creators are not fully aware at each and every moment of where their work is going and how it will turn out. The creative process is defined by moments of unconscious incubation, by accidents and discoveries, by losing and finding one’s way. Realising this is the case, authors like Weisberg are quick to add that accidental discoveries (like that of penicillin) are not creative but can become so if and when “the individual realizes that the accident could be plumbed further” (Weisberg, 1993, p. 243). What at a macro-level and in retrospect seems like a planned and conscious journey, at a micro-level looks like a continuous cycle of micro-discoveries, of uncertainties and re-evaluations. This state of affairs has been superbly captured by John Dewey in his proposition of seeing the (artist’s) creative work as a constant cycle of *doings* (acting on the world) and *undergoings* (taking in the reaction of the world). The creator does not create in a vacuum but in a physical and social environment and the creative process is intrinsically linked to this environment. Furthermore, instead of placing accidents at the periphery of creative action we should consider them, as Dewey encourages us, at the core of an authentic experience of being creative:

“The unexpected turn, something which the artist himself does not definitely foresee, is a condition of the felicitous quality of a work of art; it saves it from

being mechanical. It gives the spontaneity of the unpremeditated to what would otherwise be a fruit of calculation. The painter and poet like the scientific inquirer know the delights of discovery. Those who carry on their work as a demonstration of a preconceived thesis may have the joys of egotistic success but not that of fulfilment of an experience for its own sake. In the latter they learn by their work, as they proceed, to see and feel what had not been part of their original plan and purpose" (Dewey, 1934, pp. 144-145).

There is mounting evidence today that the creative process is not taking place 'in the mind' of the person, according to her intentions and plans, but actually is being played out in interactions with a physical and social world. This conclusion is supported both by creators and scientists. Paul Klee (1930) for example, discussing the process of painting, concludes that the painter "knows a great deal, but he only knows it *afterwards*" (cited in Lynton, 1975, p. 49). From another standpoint, Bruner shrewdly remarks, "the road to banality is paved with creative intentions" (Bruner, 1962, p. 18). Adopting such a perspective on creativity, much more akin to a 'cultural' reading of it, encourages us to bring back to the table the notion of children's creativity. Children, especially at lower ages, don't plan and don't intend very much. But at the same time, whatever they 'create' (a drawing, a form, a story, etc.), they are very eager to infuse with meaning and different interpretations. The same drawing becomes the basis for multiple stories, the same construction the starting point of different games. The 'happy accidents' referred to earlier are indeed happy, prompting meaning-creation further and further.

### *3.3. The person perspective*

Creativity as a strictly personal (or intrapersonal) affair has been criticised above, and yet what centuries of thinking about 'creation' and decades of creativity research have shown us is precisely the fact that creativity was (and still is to a large extent) considered an individual attribute. The person of the genius is responsible for 'creating' and, more recently, the personality or cognition of the individual are seen as the locus of creativity (Glăveanu, 2010a). When applied to children, the person definition is bound to run into a serious problem. As argued in section 1, children have by and large been historically considered not as 'real' but as future persons, as 'becoming' persons. As such, the personality or cognitive structures of the child are in permanent construction and transformation so how can we legitimately talk about a child's stable creative traits? Nonetheless, some authors can and do. For example Dudek (1973, p. 6), was confident to argue that "what we call creativity in children would seem to fall under the definition of creativity as personality trait". This attitude or trait was not called creativity (unsurprisingly given the controversy presented here) but *expressiveness*, a precursor of later creative achievement. Expressiveness stands for characteristics such

as spontaneity, openness, outgoingness and aliveness. It was of course noted that this quality of the child is not really stable, at least below the age of five (p. 15).

What is it, again, that makes authors so reluctant to talk directly about the creativity of children? The person perspective adds to the process one in this regard. The lack of full self and others-*awareness* is pointed to when disregarding children's expressive efforts. Children, it is considered, rarely reflect on themselves and little less on whether they are creative or artistic (Engel, 1993). How could they? And even when it's granted to them the awareness of doing things differently than others, a lack of appreciation for what rules and conventions are is lamented (Gardner, 1982, p. 89). Related to this point, children as a person 'in becoming' lack a real *knowledge base* to support their 'creativity'. Several authors have noticed in the work of great creators "an extensive amount of time between their initial exposure to the field and production of their first significant work" (Weisberg, 1999, p. 227). This has been formalised by Gardner (1993) as the "10-year rule". Applying this logic to children would mean that, if seriously starting to engage with a domain at the age of two, chances are that only after 12 years of age a remarkable contribution would be made... Fortunately or unfortunately though, children are much less focused and determined than this, having to learn about the world in general, and not some obscure segment of it. The 'Great Creation' paradigm, in action, limits again the meaning of what constitutes creative work.

In the end, the scientific community is gradually becoming disenchanted with the perspective of locating creativity in the person, in her personality traits or cognitive mechanisms. There are plenty of reasons for this. To begin with, measures of personality or cognition (like divergent thinking) did not demonstrate high predictive validity. This is most obvious in the case of children, whose creative 'potential' is constantly scrutinised with the hope of determining who will be the creators of tomorrow. However, measures of 'expressiveness', for example, are not predictive of future performance (Dudek, 1973, p. 15). At a deeper level though, this dissatisfaction with intrapersonal explanations of creativity came as a result of acknowledging that creating is not an individual affair, but involves the individual in relation to society and culture. This aspect starts to be reflected in the 'press' factor discussed below.

#### *3.4. The press (social) perspective*

Before putting children's creativity to the 'test' of this last factor, it is important to make a general note about it. For emphasising social influences on creativity, the 'press' factor might seem at the beginning quite in tone with a 'cultural' reading of creativity. This is and is not so because, beyond stating that the social and cultural matter when we talk about creativity, 'cultural' approaches also have a special way of understanding the social and the cultural. Mainstream psychology (including social,

developmental and creativity psychology) have often considered the social as an outside factor, influencing the thinking and behaviour of the individual, putting certain 'pressures' (hence press) on them and directing them. Cultural psychology makes a point in considering society and culture as working from 'within' and not (only) from the 'outside' of socialised individuals. Institutions and social structures exist on the 'outside', but the symbolic world they populate can only be developed 'in' and especially 'in between' persons. The relevance of this observation will become obvious as follows.

Are children creative in relation to the social and the cultural world? They certainly belong to this world and make constant efforts to apprehend it and become part of it. These efforts, defining the developmental process, are in fact revealing the 'creativity' of adjusting to an outside space which is at times comfortable and familiar, at times scary and dangerous, but most of all overwhelming in its demanding complexity. And yet, many would argue that it is precisely because children don't have anything to contribute to this 'space', that they cannot and should not be called creative. Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) model of *person – field – domain* illustrates this point:

"This is an epistemological issue; in my view, it is society that constitutes creativity; therefore you can't say that a child has any creativity to be suppressed until a certain segment of society – the *field* – construes it as such. I don't know what it means to say that children are creative or that they display creativity. Usually what people mean by these terms is that children often appear to adults to be original, imaginative, or nonconforming. One could just as well interpret such behavior as ignorance of rules, or inability to follow them. There is really no evidence that this relates to adult creativity, as we usually think of it – that is, as an original response that is *socially valued and brought to fruition*" (Csikszentmihalyi in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 220).

Other authors agree with this position. Feldman remarks for example that it is true that "no child has ever added to a culturally valued body of knowledge" (in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 219). The issue of (social and cultural) value, touched upon in section 3.1., gains its true proportion when we consider it in light of social mechanisms. Consistent with his epistemology, Csikszentmihalyi is ready nevertheless to acknowledge the fact that children's productions can be 'valuable' indeed for parents and teachers, but for as long as there is no constituted domain and field for them, they remain "peripheral to every culture" and, as such, "the creativity of such productions is not very relevant" (Csikszentmihalyi in Sawyer et al., 2003, p. 220).

This particular vision brings us right back to the first observation regarding the two understandings of culture. On the one hand we have a structural, institutional, and highly formalised version of culture, adopted by Csikszentmihalyi and others. On the

other hand though, we can hold a vision of culture as a micro *and* macro phenomenon, dynamic and open to the 'small creations' that keep it alive and give it continuity. Culture as a set of symbolic and material artefacts, of norms and conventions, of types of knowledge and behaviours, doesn't need to be embodied in a recognised field or domain to exist as such (see Glăveanu, 2010b; Willis, 1990). Culture exists and is produced between people as well, in families, in schools, on the streets, etc. Contributing to these (micro) cultures is no less significant than contributing to institutionalised domains such as the arts or sciences. Without all these contributions we would not be able to speak of culture or society. Great Creations are remarkable, but small, mundane ones, are very much significant in their own right. And it is this kind of significance that children's 'creative' activity gains and generates. As Engel (1993) rightfully observes, the classroom context for example is a cultural system in itself, no less comparable to artists' studios, scientists' laboratories or inventors' testing rooms.

#### ***4. A practical 'bet' and its implications***

Our analysis of arguments for and against the idea of children's creativity has revealed thus far a very complex picture. Indeed, there is no single uncontested criterion that can help us to delineate radically the creative from the uncreative. What is more, each criterion discussed above (originality, value, intentionality, etc.) is deeply and intricately connected to our general conceptions about children and creativity as such. In order to simplify things – although in this regard simplifications can be misleading – we can come to abstract two general directions in how we conceptualise children on the one hand, and creativity on the other. By and large, children are either depicted in our theories as *passive and receptive*, depending on the outside world and simply 'taking in' the influence of their environment, or as *active and interactive*, responding from an early age to the world around them and developing through interactions with others, where both child and other shape the course of the interaction. In the case of creativity the claim has been made for a distinction between *romantic or 'genius'* readings of the phenomenon, based on the image of the Great Creator and the revolutionary creation, and *cultural and social* readings, trying to bridge great creative achievements with the everyday productions of 'ordinary' people. In this simplified landscape, it becomes clear that persons (including scientists) who believe in the idea of a passive child and hold a genius vision of creativity, will most likely answer the question 'are children creative?' in a negative way. On the contrary, an active child and a cultural perspective on creativity may support a positive answer to the same question. Of course there are many more positions 'in between' and some people may agree with some arguments and not others. While my personal views incline towards the second type of answer, this article was not meant to be an exercise in discovering the '*truth*' about children and creativity. Written from a constructionist perspective, the assumption I started with is that different readings or stories we tell about people,

objects and processes of the world, need to be understood in their own right. Neither one, in this case, is more 'correct' than the other simply because (and this has been the central piece of the argument) they are drawing from different interpretative frameworks. To simplify even further, if possible, they serve as two differently coloured pairs of glasses, and when using one we get to see the same object differently from when we use the other.

Having said that, constructionism is not meant to be an 'everything goes' type of epistemology. Although different constructions of the world are possible, it doesn't mean all are *equally useful* for acting in the world. With the risk of turning to pragmatism right towards the end, I will propose looking at children's creativity in a way similar to Pascal's wager about the existence of God (see 2008 edition). In a nutshell, his argument was that believing in the existence of God is bound to bring many advantages if the belief turns out to be correct while still being advantageous even when proven wrong. The alternative belief is detrimental in both cases. Applying this to our particular question, it can be phrased as: adopting a position favourable to seeing the child as active and creativity as incorporating 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' accomplishments turns out to have many more theoretical and practical benefits than the alternative. Let us briefly elaborate on these in three domains: child psychology, the psychology of creativity, and education.

Child psychologists starting with the premise that children are indeed creative from an early age, in their own ways, supported by social interaction and using the means they have at their disposal, would probably focus more on how novelty is produced and the role it plays in the development of the child (see also Feldman, 1999, on creativity and developmental shifts). They would recognise the efforts made by children, from early on, to engage with the world around them, to adjust to it while at the same time trying to make it a more hospitable and secure place. Cultivating a vision where children's *agency* is implied would make us look more carefully at moments of micro-interaction between children and their peers, families, teachers, etc. and how they are driven by the active and creative involvement of *both* parties. This particular line of research is starting to be explored more and more by authors who focus on the bidirectionality of parent-child relations (Lawrence and Valsiner, 2003; Kuczynski and Navara, 2006), on elaborating a dynamic theory of socialisation (Maccoby, 1992; Kuczynski and Parkin, 2007), and an interpretative approach to development (Corsaro and Eder, 1990). All these elaborations are fundamentally challenging the notion of the child as passively modelled by parents and broader social systems. On the contrary, children "build in innovative ways on the structure of the culturally organized information that they experience in interaction with others and in their exploration of the man-made physical environment" (Valsiner, 1997, p. 176). A developmental psychology founded on this kind of ethos would bring the 'creative' expressions of the child to the forefront,

studying them in the context of the life and experience of their 'author' and less by comparison to those of the adult. Children's meanings associated with their creations would be valued, reducing the risk of adultcentric and restrictive interpretations.

For creativity theory and research, accepting the existence of children's creativity would have even more radical consequences, some of which have been captured in the sections above. Genius readings of creativity have been all too dominant in past and present literature on the topic, obscuring the fact that 'creative' expression should not be restricted to an individual or small group of individuals but be reconnected to the life of human communities. As Bateson (1999, p. 153) notes, denying everyday life creativity "deprives us of a range of models for the creative process". The present article exposed some of the potentially beneficial consequences of reading creativity through cultural 'lenses': a more fluid process and performance based approach, a grounding of creative action in the social and material world, a recasting of culture as an emergent phenomenon. This would also encourage researchers to understand the mechanisms of 'little c creativity', a notion discussed by Anna Craft extensively in her work. As an attitude to life revolving around the "resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people" (Craft, 2001, p. 49), little c creativity is an expression of 'possibility thinking', in its turn founded on imagination, curiosity and play (Craft, 2002). But above all, what children's creativity would mean for creativity research is operating with a broader, more comprehensive *definition* of creativity. 'Ordinary' creativity can and does have 'extraordinary' effects, and among them is the maintenance and constant re-generation of human culture. Furthermore, what this 'extended definition' does in the end is to reveal the false dichotomy between 'higher' and 'lower' forms of creativity. These are not separated by a 'gap', and neither placed on a 'continuum', but the 'higher' is *built upon* the 'lower', without which it would not exist. Celebrated forms of creativity are spurring from the fertile ground of everyday, playful creation. It is what Wegerif (2010, p. 38) also hinted at when considering that:

"(...) it is not possible to get creativity 2, socially valued products, without first having lots of creativity 1, the everyday creativity of playfully coming up with lots of new and different ideas, connections and ways of seeing things regardless of whether or not these are socially valuable".

Finally, when it comes to educational practices, it is quite obvious why recognising children's creativity is better than the alternative: it manages to put it on the agenda of educators and encourages them to consider creative expression and foster all those behaviours and attitudes linked to it (Craft, 2005). Creativity has come to be considered one of the most valuable attributes a person could have, at least in today's Western societies, if not at a global level (Manson, 2003), and this certainly lead to the universalisation of creativity in the contemporary world of education (Jeffrey and Craft,

2001). Thinking about ways in which this quality can be cultivated in children is bound to bring together (as it does) parents, teachers and scientists from a variety of disciplines. Believing in the existence of creativity in children will further help 'materialise' it, by paying more attention to all instances with potential creative value. Csikszentmihalyi argued, as we have seen from above, that a domain such as 'children's art' is peripheral to our culture and so children's creativity is a contradiction in terms. This positions us inside a *vicious cycle* where not legitimising creativity leads to not encouraging or even discovering it, which in turn explains the absence of more institutionalised forums to be concerned with it, and finally reinforces the attitude of ignoring it even as a possibility. It is plausible that, if more people consider children to be creative, there will be stronger societal level transformations to allow for the display and celebration of this form of creativity. However, encouraging creativity in educational settings is not without its own problems and dilemmas, both practical and theoretical, psychological and pedagogical. Craft (2005) highlighted several of these, from the assumption that creativity is universal in nature and always a 'good thing' in the classroom, to the more pragmatic relationship between knowledge, the curriculum and creativity. These are all issues that require deep consideration and creative thinking on the part of theorists and practitioners alike.

### **5. Concluding thoughts**

This article has addressed the issue of children's creativity and argued for considering children as active and creative beings, developing forms of creative expression in interaction with adults and through play and experimentation with cultural artefacts. The interrogation about children's creativity is far from meaningless. In fact, Vygotsky himself stated that "one of the most important questions of child psychology and pedagogy is the question about creativity in children, its development and its significance for the general development of the child" (Vygotsky, 1930/1967, cited in Smolucha, 1992, p. 51). And yet, despite its importance, we know little about the formative conditions of creativity in children (Feldhusen, 2002, p. 182). This is arguably the result not only of the intricacy of the phenomenon (which, on its own, could very well explain the slow progress) but, importantly, also of our general conceptions about children and about creativity. Opting for an understanding of children as creative would potentially *transform* our theories about children *and* creativity, and also influence our educational practices. In itself though, this would be only the beginning for a new set of questions and research interests. At least two of great importance are: research methodologies for studying children's creativity and the domain specificity or generality of children's creative expression. Both areas are not 'new' in any way, yet much of the work done in these fields reflects some problematic assumptions. For example, testing children's creativity often starts from the premise that creativity is an intrapersonal feature or that creative products can be rated by experts who have little

access to process-information. Also, when it comes to creativity and domains, adopting a cultural perspective would support specificity with more arguments such as the 'local' embeddedness of creative action and the dependence of the symbolic function on available systems of tools and signs. All these insights and many more would be lost though unless we become ready to entertain the idea that children and creativity form not only a likely but also a promising pair.

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