

Editorial

From the Sylvia Plath Effect to Social Justice: Moving Forward With Creativity

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Abstract

The author contrasts an early research passion, creativity and mental illness, with his current interest in creativity and social justice. Kaufman's initial research revolved around the Sylvia Plath Effect, yet was insensitive to broader implications or concerns. As his thinking about creativity has evolved, he is currently more focused on a more positive use for creativity – namely, how creativity can help issues of fairness and equity.

Keywords: creativity, creativity and mental illness, creativity and social justice

Europe's Journal of Psychology, 2017, Vol. 13(2), 173–177, doi:10.5964/ejop.v13i2.1413

Published (VoR): 2017-05-31.

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In being asked to write an editorial for *Europe's Journal of Psychology* by my dear friend and colleague Vlad Glăveanu, I decided to take the chance to reflect a bit on my career. Instead of embarking on some type of full-fledged intellectual autobiography (which no one is clamoring for), I focused on two distinct research passions I have had over my intellectual life.

I have been studying creativity for nearly twenty years now. One of my early studies was the Sylvia Plath Effect (Kaufman, 2001), which was a historiometric look at eminent writers and mental health. I found that female poets were more likely to show signs of mental illness compared to other writers (including male poets) and women well-known in other domains (art, politics, acting, and non-poetry writing). I did a few follow-up studies and theoretical papers that were generally consistent (Kaufman, 2003, 2005a; Kaufman & Baer, 2002).

I was young and stupid and when the media came calling, I was happy to brainstorm or suggest possible reasons for the effect. It took off and articles about the Sylvia Plath Effect appeared on the *New York Times*, CNN, and many, many others. I saw a lot of misinterpretation; many assumed it simply meant that all female poets were mentally ill (regardless of level of eminence), or else that all poets, writers, or anyone creative were more likely to have mental illness.

Years later, the phrase has spawned several indie rock songs, several blogs, and shows up sporadically in poetry and fiction (including a recent romance novel, curiously enough). I am still regularly interviewed about it. As I matured and studied more aspects of creativity, I was less thrilled about the Sylvia Plath Effect legacy. For a while, I tried to tackle it head-on. I made several arguments against the importance of my own work. My study was based on brief biographies in reference works, and it is easy to over-extrapolate. There just aren't that many biographies of completely normal people; happy folks aren't the most interesting topic in the world (Silvia & Kaufman, 2010). A standard technique used to convince people that creativity is inextricably linked to mental illness is to offer endless lists of creative geniuses who have been (often erroneously) labelled as being mentally ill. That said, it's easy to do that for anything. For example, here are two lists:

List One: Alexander the Great, Gracie Allen, David Bowie, Benedict Cumberbatch, Robert Downey Jr, pitcher Max Scherzer, Michael Flatley (Riverdance), Kiefer Sutherland, Christopher Walken

List Two: Ray Bradbury, Joan Ganz Cooney (creator of Sesame Street), John Denver, Barbara Kingsolver, Lee Marvin, Art Moreno (owner of the Angels), Linda Ronstadt

List One is people with Heterochromia iridum, or having eyes of two different colors. List Two is people associated with Tucson, Arizona (thank you, Wikipedia!) So what?

Do I mean to say that there's absolutely zero connection? No. There have been a lot of studies and as much contradiction exists, there are some broad points that reappear (i.e., higher rates of mental illness in artists and writers than businesspeople and scientists; increased renown may be associated with increased rates of illness). But there are too many questions. Any attempt to synthesize the research (which I have nonetheless attempted; Kaufman, 2014, 2016b) ends up merging disparate results. It's the equivalent of having different studies that show (a) rhubarb leads to higher rates of diabetes; (b) popcorn lowers the rate of heart disease; and (c) eating thirty pounds of chocolate each day increases toenail cancer – and then making the grand claim that food is linked to health.

Although in my mind I've simply moved away from this area, I'm not sure if instead I'm trying for a *mea culpa* with the last few years of work. I do have to acknowledge that to the extent that my work has glamorized mental illness or associated it with being creative, then I've made the larger problem worse. A journalist recently asked me my thoughts on young women idolizing Plath on social media, and it did make me think. It's easy to say that of course, idolizing (and imitating) Plath won't make someone more creative or artistic. But people still do it, and that can be dangerous. Romanticizing depression and pain can lead to self-injurious behavior or the belief that you need to have tragedy or illness to be an artist.

My more recent focus is to emphasize how creativity can lead to good outcomes. Certainly, creativity researchers tend to not study this angle very much. Most papers use creativity as the dependent variable and not the independent variable. They want to know what leads to creativity, not what can come out of creativity (Forgeard & Kaufman, 2016). Less than 10% of papers go into detail about why creativity is important or meaningful at all.

After spending the first half of my career studying negative constructs associated with creativity, I am trying to work on the positive side. Two different events that happened that sharpened my interest in one of my current passions, creativity and fairness. The first was that when I joined Educational Testing Service in 2000, I was lucky enough to get to know measurement expert Gwyneth Boodoo. In addition to being one of the world's

experts on the topic of fairness, she is also an incredibly nice person who took an interest in a naïve neophyte. I knew I wanted to learn from her; since her area was fairness, I decided to think about creativity and fairness. We didn't end up publishing on the topic but had many fruitful conversations. A couple of years later, my dear friend Cecil Reynolds invited me to write a chapter on non-biased assessment for a handbook he was co-editing. Under his guidance, I first suggested some of the ideas that I have continued to explore (Kaufman, 2005b). Central among them was the idea of using non-cognitive constructs as a supplement to existing measures. Non-cognitive constructs might include personality, resiliency, leadership, or emotional intelligence (Kyllonen, Walters, & Kaufman, 2005). Although creativity absolutely includes cognitive components, it still makes the list (one could argue that non-cognitive practically means anything that isn't included on current ability or achievement tests).

My argument is that adding creativity (or other constructs) can increase fairness and equity. The discrepancies in scores across ethnicity and gender on most ability and achievement tests do not necessarily mean that the tests are biased. However, the choice to only use these tests and nothing else can be problematic. Most studies that examine creativity by ethnicity or gender (e.g., Baer & Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman, Baer, & Gentile, 2004; see Kaufman, 2016a, for review) find no differences; studies of self-perceptions of creativity sometimes shows an advantage for underrepresented groups (Ivcevic & Kaufman, 2013; Kaufman, 2006). Given that creativity is often seen as a core component of intelligence (Kaufman & Plucker, 2011), the decision to measure more traditional analytic abilities but overlook creativity may represent bias (Kaufman, 2010, 2015). Similar arguments can be made for giftedness encompassing creativity (Kaufman, Plucker, & Russell, 2012) yet not always including it as a criterion for admissions (Luria, O'Brien, & Kaufman, 2016), as well as the general lack of creativity in college or graduate school admissions (Kaufman, 2010).

At this point in my career, I am delving deeper into this topic. There is much to explore. Beyond exploring the admissions angle, I want to explore the positive ways that creativity can enhance social justice. What positive effects might occur if we highlight the importance (and specifics) of creativity in teacher education programs? Or if teachers then seek to nurture the creativity of their students? How might people be creative in their quest to fight for a more just world? How can creativity help voiceless and marginalized groups? I am actively working with colleagues such as Vlad Glăveanu, Preston Green, and Ellen Kaplan and students such as Sarah Luria and Khalilah Arrington (and following in the footsteps of my advisor, Robert Sternberg) to address such questions.

The first recurring story of my research career was on creativity and mental illness – an emphasis on the negative that verged on exploitative. Many years and stories later, I am trying to not simply look at the positive or hopeful aspect of creativity but to think about how creativity can help people. I hope that this shifting focus is a sign of maturity or character development (or, at least, an absence of regression).

Funding

The author has no funding to report.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The author has no support to report.

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About the Author

James C. Kaufman is a Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut. He is the author/editor of more than 35 books, including *Creativity 101* (2nd Edition, 2016) and the *Cambridge Handbook of Creativity* (with Robert Sternberg; 2010). He has published more than 250 papers, including the study that spawned the "Sylvia Plath Effect" and three well-known theories of creativity, including the Four-C Model of Creativity (with Ron Beghetto). He is a past president of Division 10 (Society for Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, & the Arts) of the American Psychological Association (APA). James has won many awards, including Mensa's research award, the Torrance Award from the National Association for Gifted Children, and APA's Arnheim, Berlyne, and Farnsworth awards. He co-founded two major journals (*Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* and *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*) and currently co-edits the *International Journal of Creativity and Problem Solving*. He has tested Dr. Sanjay Gupta's creativity on CNN, appeared in the hit Australia show *Redesign Your Brain*, and narrated the comic book documentary *Independents*. He wrote the libretto to *Discovering Magenta*, which had its NYC premiere in 2015, and co-authored a book on bad baseball pitchers with his father.