Socializing the Undisciplined Thought: Ideation as a Social Practice

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to explore new paths for the science of ideas and general reflection on creativity by outlining the possibility to conceive ideation (idea generation) as a social practice. Currently, creativity is predominantly treated as a psychological phenomenon, ideas are regarded as externalized thoughts, and ideation as a mental activity. This perspective, while well-established, like its historicity and as well as social and material determinants relatively untouched.

This paper draws on the current wave of practice theories (sometimes labelled as a "practice turn" in social theory) to argue that ideation may be treated as a social practice, and its constitution and evolution as following the logic of how practices are organized in social life. The article presents the elements constitutive for any social practice to exist (i.e., meanings, materials, and competences) and shows how some practices (like fine arts and science) emerged to be socially believed to produce new ideas. It also shows that in the last century a new practice - 'deliberate creativity' - emerged as a practice producing novel and useful ideas. The current state and future development of deliberate creativity are presented as depending on changing configuration of meanings, materials, and competences of this practice.

Design/methodology/approach: The papers is a theoretical contribution illustrated by some empirical examples from other studies.

Originality/value: There is still little studies exploring the historical, social and cultural aspects of creativity and its development to current forms (e.g., Eekelen 2017, 2018; Wilf 2016; Reckwitz 2018). The proposed conceptualization is an attempt to offer an original theoretical framework allowing to grasp ideation as a social phenomenon that may inspire other research and help to explore aspects of creativity that are difficult to be accounted for within the dominant perspectives.

Keywords: Ideation, Idea Generation, Deliberate Creativity, Social Practice, Practice Theory

1 Introduction

A photo taken in the late 1950s shows eleven people (four women, six men) who are sitting at the table. Men are wearing suits, white shirts, and ties; women are wearing dresses and some jewelry. Three men at the bottom seem to be engaged in a conversation that involves pointing at something on a piece of paper. Two other men above seem just to chat. Two people raise their hands. Woman at bottom right is using a stenograph machine. Glasses of water and cups of black coffee are on the table; an ashtray is rather full though no one seems to be smoking now. The photo shows a brainstorming session at the BBDO agency in New York, where the brainstorming technique is widely believed to be originated about a decade earlier[1]. This setting looks nothing like an artist workshop, a scientific laboratory or an English, XVII-century coffee shops – all of which are regarded as places conducive to the emergence of new, sometimes breakthrough ideas. But it presents a situation in which ideas are ostensibly being generated and when something novel, original, and potentially useful is being born. Or at least we tend to believe so.

[1]The photo was presented at the TU Delft Library in 2021 as a part of an exhibition "Inventing Creativity" curated by Samuel Franklin, Bregje Van Eekelen and Geertje Van Achtenberg

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It has become almost uncontested way of thinking that ideas should be best conceived as some kind of thoughts that emerge predominantly through mental, cognitive processes. Being "applied imagination" (to use Alex Osborn's term) ideas are regarded as governed by some intrapsychic forces and mechanisms that could be best studied from psychological perspective. Accordingly, we often treat creativity as a disposition of mind, and something relatively abstracted from socio-cultural contexts. This paper argues that it could be beneficial for our understanding of creativity to explore some other analytical possibilities, especially those that allows us to account for historicity of ideation – how it appeared through time and changed across cultures and social environments. In order to do so, this paper proposes a theoretical shift – to view idea generation as a social practice that has its own origins and evolution shaped not just by psychological forces, but by meanings, values, and concepts as well as materials, tools and techniques that have been used to generate ideas in different social contexts. All these symbolic and materials elements constitute situations such as the brainstorming session depicted on the picture, and define ways in which we, at given time, do creativity.

1.1 The Practice Theoretical Approach

In this paper, I draw on the practice theoretical approach – a perspective that has received considerable attention in the last two decades as one of the promising avenues in contemporary social theory, sometimes even labelled as a 'practice turn' (Schatzki *et al.,* 2001). This approach has already become influential, particularly in the area of organization, consumption and energy studies (Hui *et al.,* 2017; Nicolini 2012; Schatzki *et al.,* 2001; Shove *et al.,* 2012).

Its basic assumption is to treat social practices (like cooking, dancing, driving a car, or shopping) as the primary objects of study. It means that in the practice theoretical approach the focus is neither on individuals (their beliefs, perceptions, or dispositions), nor on interactions, social situations, group-level phenomena, and nor or discourses, public opinion, or macro-level phenomena, but on practices. Practices are broadly defined in this approach as 'temporally evolving, open-ended sets of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understanding' (Schatzki 2002: 87). It is believed that the ongoing process of the emergence, existence, and disappearance of different kinds of practices constitutes the fabric of social life.

One of the fundamental assumptions of the practice theoretical approach is that practices are regarded as composed of a plethora of heterogeneous elements - 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, »things« and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz 2002: 249). Importantly, neither of these components is assumed to be primordial or more important than the others, but all of them are treated as interconnected and forming a dynamic configuration. What the PT-oriented studies focus on is how these 'ingredients' come together, interact, and change as practices appear and evolve.

In this article, I utilize one of the prominent PT conceptual frameworks proposing that practices involve, fundamentally, three groups of elements (Shove *et al.,* 2012): materials (tangible physical objects, tools, artifacts), meanings (symbols, norms, aspiration, ideas, and purposes), and competences (forms of practical knowledge, understanding, know-how). For example, if we take cycling in the form popular in some current Western societies, it can be viewed as a practice composed of the following elements: materials (like bikes, outfits, road infrastructure), meanings (like fitness, mobility, being eco), and forms of competence (of riding a bike, moving safe in the city traffic, protecting the bike from being stolen etc.). All these elements form a dynamic configuration which means that they are linked to each other, and co-dependent.

Practices are relatively stable, but also dynamic, which means that while they are reproduced across time and space, they also undergo constant transformations - new materials and tools are introduced, new

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meanings appear, and new forms of competence become required to perform a practice. Just a cycling evolved from an activity that in many Wester-European countries was related mostly to entertainment or even play, something suitable for children and young people, but it also became an appropriate activity for adults, a normal way of commuting, or – in some of its variants – also an adventurous and high adrenaline activity. In these transformation new forms of cycling emerged not only through the transformations of meanings attributed to cycling, but also due to introduction of some new material objects (e.g., new kinds of bikes like down-hill bikes and road-bikes, or new forms of outfit and equipment like mobile application for cycling), and infrastructures (networks of paths) and also relevant skills and competences (how to use and maintain new kinds of bikes, and how to decide what kind of outfit is appropriate or fashionable).

One of the theoretical values of the practice theoretical approach is that it allows to study how an array of heterogeneous elements comes together to constitute a given practice, and how this practice appears and evolves across time and space. This is the main theoretical reason to use this perspective to study idea generation processes.

1.2 Ideas as Outcomes of Practices

It seems reasonable to assume that ideas have always been appearing as practices were performed and that they have been emerging – so to say – *within* practices. When people engage in practices of any kind (be it dancing, cooking, or farming) new ideas (like for a certain kind of bodily movement, combination of ingredients for a dish, or changes in planting techniques) emerge from time to time. Some of these ideas are novel and potentially useful as solve some problems at hand, and thus meeting the criteria that are commonly applied to assess value of ideas (Amabile, 1996). In this reasoning, any practice can be regarded as a context within which some ideas may emerge and to which they pertain.

However, some practices have become historically associated with the production of new ideas becoming special environments or 'realms' of novelty, originality, and ingenuity. Probably the most evident examples are fine arts and science in a shape they took in early modernity. These practices became expected to produce new ideas as their 'outcomes'. Once articulated, ideas could become taken up by the 'outside' world and incorporated into some other practices. A scientific finding could be turned into an engineering invention (as historians of science tell us, long into modernity science was practices mostly by amateurs, many of whom were interesting in solving practical problems [Afeltowicz ,2011]) that would later be used in other social fields (like lasers that became commonly used in everyday objects, to give just one example). Similarly, an artistic work (like a painting) is an outcome of a practice of painting that may travel to other practices to become admired or refuted, sold, hand over, and hang on a wall. In this process, ideas originated in one context diffuse and become part of some other domains.

In the practise theoretical lenses, the emergence of practices as 'sources' of ideas was related to their certain internal organization – a certain configuration of meanings, materials and competences that constituted them. Novelty and originality, instead of repetition and following strict aesthetic patters became an essential part of values and meanings attributed to art in Western culture at least from the Renaissance onward. Science became organized (at least officially) as the quest in to the unknown in the pursuit of truth about nature and human. These values became constitutive for making art and doing science. Another part of both the artistic and scientific practices were skills and competences - not only a field relevant expertise, but also some know-how on how to look for novelty, how to come up with new ideas, how to get inspiration, etc.

Yet perhaps the most intriguing and often overlooked elements of these idea-generating practices were materials, tools, artifacts, and technologies that can been seen as equally constitutive for these practices as meanings and competences. To make art or science have typically required using instruments which role is

not that evident when we look at the effects of these practices as disembedded from the context in which they originated. As the sociologist and historians of science argue the devices used to capture, measure, represent or enact phenomena - be it telescopes, spectrometers, or particle colliders - are defining and organizing scientific practices,that are quite literally based upon around them, as without these devices little scientific activity can be performed (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Coopmans *et al.,* 2014). Yet perhaps even less visible is the role of plethora of devices used for making art – like perspective grid, camera obscura, or different kinds of lenses. Paying more attention to these mundane, materials elements render the ideas that were generated in these processes as dependent not on the pure activity of mind, but at least partly being an effect of the material apparatus that was in place. For example, it is possible to interpret the differences of light and colour between Caravaggio's and Vermeer van Delft's painting as depending on the quality of lenses they used:

> The better the lens, the better the colour. Every lens is different, that's still true now, even of mass manufactured ones. And in those days, some would have been much better than others. So Caravaggio probably wouldn't have been too carried away by the colour he saw, and in fact there is little bright colour in his pictures. The difference was I think Vermeer had a lens made of very good clear glass – meaning the green tints had gone, so the reds, blues and yellows would have looked really beautiful (Hockney and Gayford 2016: 197)

The practices making art or doing science are by no means the only ones which we perceive and conducive to the emergence of ideas – the other obvious examples may be composing, writing, design, and engineering. Treating them, as I suggest in this article, as idea-generating practices, allows to see contexts in which ideas were generated as configurations of meanings, materials and forms of practical knowledge and competence – and all these elements as playing a constitutive role, helping or constraining certain ideas to appear.

1.3 Deliberate Creativity as a Social Practice

The picture described it the opening paragraph of this article shows, however, not a painter's workshop or a scientific lab, but an act of brainstorming. It is customary to write histories of what is called in professional literature 'creative problem solving' or 'deliberate creativity' in a way presenting its evolution as if it was just an approach or method that relates to universal mechanism of human mind - some internal, psychological processes that can be researched upon and stimulated in order to enhance originality, freshness, and usefulness of ideas (Runco 2010; van der Meer and Brouwer 2022). The 'discovery' of creativity as 'an aspect of intellect' (Guilford, 1958), happened in the middle of XX century, culminating in Joy Paul Guilford's presidential address at the congress of American Psychological Association and the introduction of *Torrance Test of Creative Thinking* (Reckwitz, 2018). However, in closer reading, this 'discovery' of creativity may be rather seen as its 'invention' that happened between 1945 and 1965, entailed some prolonged collaboration between psychologists and US military that became interested in stimulating new ideas – along with the intensification of the Cold War, increased nuclear threat, and the so-called Sputnik-shock (Van Eekelen 2017). The concept of 'deliberate creativity' that emerged at that time and persists today has assumed that creativity may be not only psychologically defined and measured, but also stimulated (among children, students, and employees), mostly through enhancing some natural capabilities of human's minds (like divergent thinking) and by the usage of techniques suitable for teamwork (like brainstorming). But deliberate creativity can be treated not only as a concept or approach, but also as a distinct social practice that is performed in order to come up with new ideas. In this view, deliberate creativity is not a term, but something that people do (just as we go for coffee, visit a doctor, or take part in academic conferences) – it is a distinguishable set of activities that are organized around certain meanings and objects,

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and require relevant competences to be practiced. Accordingly, its emergence and evolution to current states may be seen as linking these elements together.

On the level of meanings, the origins of deliberate creativity required a significant cultural transformation in which idea generation ceased to be treated as an undisciplined flow of thoughts, became largely deprived of its associations with madness or divinity, and began to be treated as an appropriate, valuable kind of work (Van Eekelen 2017, 2018; Reckwitz 2018). In this process, creative capabilities of employees started to be treated as an asset of an organization – something worth measuring and enhancing. Accordingly, the 'creative self' emerged as a personality ideal embodying being prone to express unusual ways of thinking yet also well-adjusted to the rationalized workplace. The conceptual background of these transformations combined the input from academic psychologist like Joy Paul Guilford and Robert J. Sternberg with some more loose notions like Abraham Maslow's peak experiences, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's flow experiences, and some general humanistic psychology concepts like self-realization, self-growth, and openness to experience (Reckwitz, 2018). Originality and non-conformism were then no longer a sign of misfit, but a virtue, a condition for making something valuable. Creativity became to be treated as a 'social good beyond immediate technological concern (…) [and] ideal creative person was a liberal citizen capable of resisting conformity, adapting to change, and being innovative all the same time' (Franklin, Van Eekelen and Van Achtenberg, 2021).

Along came the new set of values that was to regulate the practice of idea generation – with the famous brainstorming rules: postponing judgement, welcoming wild ideas, and aiming for quantity instead of quality (Osborn, 1967). While these rules are often treated as conditions enhancing fluency of idea generation, it should be noted that they were used to enact and incorporate the 'undisciplined' modes of thinking and acting in specific, to some extend routine, work-related environments. Hence, what we commonly celebrate as a liberation of mind was nevertheless also an organized and socially regulated activity. Actually, it seems that this peculiar combination of humanist and somewhat Romantic ethos with the orientation on efficiency and effectiveness made it possible to incorporate deliberate creativity in such settings as UX military, advertising agencies, or factories – seemingly distant from a painter's atelier or a scientist's lab.

This combination of meanings was accompanied by the emergence of a plethora of materials, tools, devices, instruments, and technologies with which deliberate creative was practiced. One of the early artifacts that went to use were ideas cards and suggestion boxes that appeared in US factories during the Second World War (Van Eekelen, 2018). Brainstorming session mentioned at the beginning of this papers involved tables, chairs, papers, pencils, coffee, cigarettes, and – last not least – a stenograph machine. Later came sticky notes that have become so commonly associated with creativity (Wilf, 2016; Matthews *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, their weak adhesive properties and limited size imposed provisionality and encouraged going for quantity, but on the other hand they also allowed ideas to be quickly captured, moved, juxtapose, and re-arranged. The list of artifacts involved in creativity is much longer, including whiteboards, flipcharts, markers, countless graphical frameworks (like 2 x 2 matrices or Venn diagrams) or elaborated setting for Synectics sessions. This list should also include several tests, questionaries, diagrams, images used in measurement of creativity as a phenomenon and diagnoses of creative potential of individuals. In the practice theoretical lenses, all these elements are not only tools but constituents of a practice of ideation – to do deliberate creativity means, in a quite pragmatic sense, to gather around such objects, touch them and move them around, while their material structure and properties shape what is being said and done in quite a literal way. It is, for example, impossible or at least difficult, to give a detailed description of an idea on a sticky note, or - similarly – it is hard to avoid the impression that a cloud of sticky notes on a wall after an ideation session enacts and evidences the creative effect that just happened. These materials, artifacts and tools make ideation possible and allow it to appear in certain settings.

Finally, there are certain competences needed to take part in a creative session, some understanding of general rules like those for green-light brainstorming session that is considered necessary for every participant in order to behave 'properly' during such session, and a much wider skillset required from facilitators of such sessions (Heijne, van der Meer, 2019). The relevant know-how is embodied in several creativity-enhancing techniques, which may be learned - partly theoretically, but mostly through observation, participation, and first-hand experience. In a way, to practice deliberate creativity means to behave according to these rules. When these meanings, materials and forms of know-how competence come together, then the practice of deliberate creativity is performed.

The presented practice-theoretical view is static, but the proposed framework encourages also dynamic analyses that could go from the origins of deliberate creativity to its current forms (thus exceeding the space limits of this article). It could provide an insight into how practicing idea generation changed in the past few decades – and not just through the increasing volumes of knowledge on creativity (established scientific and popular journals, university programs, canonical texts as well as countless studies, findings, articles, and handbooks) or new and modified techniques (be it Synectics or IDEO's version of design thinking) - but also through making new associations with creativity and by incorporating new tools to this practice. In the course of decades, advertising agencies or special military teams were to a large extend replaced as sites for creativity by start-ups, and Silicon Valley companies, and creativity became widely regarded as a part of modern, innovation-oriented entrepreneurship. Suits and dresses of creative directors changed into t-shirts and hoodies of company's founders and managers, and office spaces transformed into playground-like facilities and creativity rooms. Taking care of psychological safety of employees and building creativity-supporting cultures of innovation became a part of contemporary management. New tools appeared and proliferated, mostly digital ones, like Miro, Mural, and countless others digital applications, to be used in online creativity sessions, with many of them offering ready-to-use graphical templates and short instructions of how to facilitate such a session or behave during one. The practice of deliberate creativity evolved to incorporate new meanings, materials, and skills, and expanded across new contexts.

2 Conclusions

The practice theoretical lenses offer a possibility for understanding creativity in a way that is different from dominant psychology-oriented, universalist views. It allows to see how social contexts for the generation of ideas are organized, how they emerge, transform, evolve, or disappear. It also helps to understand how different elements contribute to the process of coming up with new ideas, and how they all come together to make the generation of ideas possible in social life. Finally, this framework makes it possible to interpret these new ways of practicing creativity as resulting from modifications in the configurations of these elements in a process that still unfolds.

3 Declarations

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