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# The Sociology of Creativity: Elements, Structures, and Audiences

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## Keywords

atypicality, creative industries, creativity, cultural elements, novelty, originality

## Abstract

This review integrates diverse characterizations of creativity from a sociological perspective with the goal of reinvigorating discussion of the sociology of creativity. We start by exploring relevant works of classical social theory to uncover key assumptions and principles, which are used as a theoretical basis for our proposed definition of creativity: an intentional configuration of cultural and material elements that is unexpected for a given audience. Our argument is enriched by locating creativity vis-à-vis related concepts—such as originality, knowledge, innovation, atypicality, and consecration—and across neighboring disciplines. Underlying the discussion are antecedents (structure, institutions, and context) and consequences (audiences, perception, and evaluation), which are treated separately. We end our review by speculating on ways in which sociologists can take the discussion of creativity forward.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of creativity is pervasive in contemporary sociology. Sociologists have explored individual careers in artistic and cultural fields (e.g., Menger 1999, White 1993, Wohl 2019), the structural determinants of creative achievement (e.g., Cattani et al. 2014, De Vaan et al. 2015, Godart et al. 2014, Phillips 2011, Uzzi & Spiro 2005), and, more broadly, the generation of cultural output in the arts and the creative industries (e.g., Lena 2019, Moeran & Pedersen 2011, Opazo 2018). However, creativity as a sociological field of study encounters several challenges. First, there is intense disagreement about the concept of creativity among sociologists, not only because its conceptual elusiveness calls for historical contextualization (Reckwitz 2017) but also because its normative role as a construct associated with progress has been challenged (Morgan & Nelligan 2018). Second, existing scholarship is often rooted in related concepts such as originality and atypicality, differences between which have impeded the cumulative development of theoretical knowledge and consistent measurement of creativity across disparate studies. Third, flanked by a diverse literature on creativity in neighboring disciplines (namely psychology and economics), the benefits of constructing “a *sociology* of creativity” have “not been given the attention [they] deserve” (Chan 2011, p. 135, *italics in original*).

Although sociologists are attuned to the significance of creativity as a desired social norm that “aids problem solving, innovation, and aesthetics,” the sociology of creativity “is still forming” (Uzzi & Spiro 2005, p. 447), as reflected by a lack of creativity reviews in top sociology journals, compared with other fields. Two such reviews were published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Hennessey & Amabile 2010, Runco 2004), in which creativity was defined as “the generation of products or ideas that are both novel and appropriate” (Hennessey & Amabile 2010, p. 570). Several creativity reviews have appeared in major management journals (e.g., George 2007), some making references to sociology while reviewing management research on the creative and cultural industries (Peltoniemi 2015) and the receiving side of creativity (i.e., evaluation) (Zhou et al. 2019). As interest in sociological thinking on creativity rises, the timing seems right to cultivate a sociological component to the reviews of creativity research.

The goal of the present review is therefore to establish a coherent view of creativity using a sociological lens spanning time (encompassing classical and contemporary work on creativity) and space (articulating relevant discussions in sociology, psychology, and economics). By identifying and blending key sociological elements of creativity, a blueprint emerges for our proposed definition of creativity as an intentional configuration of cultural and material elements that is unexpected for a given audience. In unpacking this definition theoretically and empirically (using examples), we address the three challenges identified above, thereby bringing semantic consistency to creativity research and clarifying the normative implications of creativity. Ultimately, our review constitutes an invitation to sociologists to pay more attention to creativity and advance toward a sociology of creativity.

We begin by looking at creativity in the context of classical sociology and social theory to highlight its salience to the discipline. In reviewing contemporary interpretations of selected classical theorists’ treatment of creativity, we uncover the key assumptions and principles underlying much of the classical work on creativity, which we use as the theoretical basis for our definition. The discussion is enriched by comparing creativity with originality, knowledge, innovation, atypicality, and consecration—which we see as the key related sociological concepts—and highlights relevant aspects of creativity research in psychology and economics (the two most relevant neighboring disciplines). Other disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy are touched on as needed. To establish the conceptual boundaries of our definition, we examine two sociological components of creativity—antecedents (structure, institutions, and context) and consequences (audiences, perception, and evaluation)—in the context of contemporary sociology.

We used the standard approach of scanning existing articles systematically in bibliometric databases, in this case the Web of Science (Hennessey & Amabile 2010), and various creativity-related keywords<sup>1</sup> to identify relevant articles between 2009 and 2019 (inclusive) in 7 sociology journals<sup>2</sup> and 11 management journals<sup>3</sup> in which sociologists routinely publish. Our search yielded 2,170 articles, including book reviews (which helped identify relevant books).

As much of the sociological research on creativity is published not by the most impactful generalist journals in the field but in specialized journals (e.g., *Poetics*), books, and the field of organization and management theory, we conducted targeted searches on an ad hoc basis. Beyond exhaustively reviewing all sociological publications discussing creativity in top generalist sociology journals, we selected publications rooted in other disciplines and related concepts. Only when the work contained a salient discussion of creativity was it deemed relevant for inclusion in our database. We conclude our review with observations on how current understanding of creativity can inform future research in sociology and inspire a more integrative, cross-disciplinary approach.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we highlight the need for an articulated understanding of creativity encompassing the various social settings in which it is central. Second, we shed light on the sociological underpinnings of creativity in an effort to advance understanding of their context-dependent and evolving nature. Finally, we aim to spark interest among scholars in taking a more interdisciplinary approach, be it with conceptual, theoretical, or empirical projects.

## CREATIVITY IN CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL THEORY

### The Roots of the Sociology of Creativity

We first look at creativity in the context of classical sociology and social theory, leveraging contemporary interpretations to uncover unspoken assumptions and principles that then serve as a theoretical basis for our sociological definition of creativity. While a consensual definition of the subject is not essential to meaningful research in social science (Klausen 2010), our definitional effort is based on Durkheim's [1982 (1895), p. 74] claim that "the sociologist's first step must. . . be to define the things [they] treat."

Selecting a lineup of classical social theorists is a daunting task. We begin our review by going back to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—who are conventionally believed to be the chief founders of the discipline (see Giddens 1971)—and social theorists in whose work creativity has played a central role. One could argue that classical social theorists are interested in social stability over change and that this weakens the presence of creativity in their work (Némedi 1998). However, recent research has highlighted the conceptual tenets of creativity in classical social theory even when the term is not explicitly mentioned. Understanding its role in classical social theory has become a significant component of the current effort to establish a sociology of creativity (Reckwitz 2017, Watts Miller 2017).

Marx's understanding of creativity is rooted in his rejection of Hegel's idealism (Sayers 2011) and the Western philosophical tradition more broadly—since Plato's *Ion*—in which creativity is

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<sup>1</sup>Our keywords included *creativ\**, *inventiv\**, *ingenuity*, *ingenious*, *genius*, *imaginat\**, *original\**, *novel\**, and *useful\**.

<sup>2</sup>The seven sociology journals are as follows: *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review (ASR)*, *Social Forces*, *Social Science Research*, *Sociological Methods & Research*, and *Sociological Science*.

<sup>3</sup>The 11 management journals are as follows: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Management Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Research Policy*, *Strategic Organization*, *Journal of Management*, and *Industrial and Corporate Change*.

considered a form of madness or “an activity of the gods in us” (Gaut 2010, p. 1038). For Marx [1972 (1844)], creativity is fundamentally a cultural phenomenon—as in the arts—that cannot be separated from its material foundations (i.e., the work needed to make it real). The painter’s hand, therefore, is not guided by divine inspiration; it is the time and effort spent practicing that matter. In short, creativity is imagination made concrete and plays out in different ways (Parsons 1983). First, creativity is fundamentally human because, unlike other animals, humans create “an *objective world*. . . in accordance with the laws of beauty” [Marx 1972 (1844), p. 76, italics in original]. Second, it is integral to modern capitalism as it constantly innovates and generates wealth, albeit as individuals are impelled to sell their labor to survive, they are alienated from their work, ultimately losing control over what they produce and the connections they form with others and their inner selves. Paradoxically, then, capitalism’s unending demand for creativity risks destroying its foundations.

Creativity is a “key concern and problematic built into Durkheim’s sociology from the start” (Watts Miller 2017, p. 17). Like Marx, Durkheim finds creativity in human nature, introducing such concepts as “creative power” (*puissance créatrice*) and “free creations of the mind” (*libres créations de l’esprit*) (Watts Miller 2017, p. 19). Durkheimian notions of creativity are most saliently observed in his study of religion. He sees effervescence of religious life as the source of creativity, introducing it as an embodiment of the power of society as well as a manifestation of collective consciousness. The cultural elements that remain after a religious experience thus become a “surplus. . . seek[ing] to busy itself with supplementary and superfluous works of luxury—that is, with works of art” [Durkheim 1995 (1912), p. 385]. Creativity emerges when individuals engage in a playful combination of these elements.

Weber’s [1986 (1921)] approach to creativity appears to contradict Marx’s theory that modern capitalism is driven by an exceptional ability to innovate. For Weber, capitalism is sustained by bureaucracy; the adoption of increasingly rational and rigid organizational functions can dampen innovation. Yet creativity is not altogether absent from Weber’s bureaucratic capitalism—it appears in the form of a specialized function managed by engineers within the organization, such as the R&D department. Thus, creativity can be an organizational phenomenon—its fate hinges on organizational factors.

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber offer a first glimpse of what creativity might look like in the context of sociology, that is, a fundamentally human and collective penchant to create something new by combining various elements from both the cultural and material realms. The focus on creation is not surprising given that the word creativity comes from the Latin *creāre* (to create) (Götz 1981, p. 298). This perspective might be said to resemble the anthropological notion of creativity as constitutive of all human societies (Fuentes 2017), perhaps predating language itself (Asma 2017), but sociologists see creativity as a context-dependent construct with a central role in generating change and innovation in the context of modern capitalism, facilitated by the emergence of new forms of social organization and institutions.

Other (classical) social theorists from the twentieth century who are considered to have contributed to a sociological understanding of creativity include Tarde [1903 (1890)], with his exploration of imitation and diffusion. Like Durkheim, Tarde uses several synonyms such as *invention*, *inventivité* (inventiveness), and *imagination créatrice* (creative imagination) to refer to the emergence of new ideas and practices (Glăveanu 2019). Unlike Durkheim, Tarde sees imitation as central to our understanding of society and as the enabler of creativity—albeit the two may seem antithetical. He argues that as individuals of different origin simultaneously imitate one another to make sense of their diversity, new ideas, practices, and products emerge. In short, there is no creativity without imitation. He thus introduces a combinatorial view of creativity (Simonton 2010)—individuals borrow various elements from each other and thus create something unexpected.

The notion that creativity stems from imitation and connects disparate individuals is central to Adorno & Horkheimer's [1997 (1947)] analysis of the culture industry (*Kulturindustrie* in German) (i.e., popular culture and the mass media), thereby attributing to creativity a role in social domination (see Negus & Pickering 2000). They argue that while modern capitalism has displaced traditional aesthetics, far from generating social fragmentation and cultural dislocation, the optimized, industrialized process of rearranging cultural and material elements gives rise to supply-driven cultural products designed to appeal to a broad audience. Hollywood movies, pop songs, and comic books are easy to understand and create a constant impression of newness that influences consumers' expectations. Content to be entertained in this way, consumers do not question or challenge their position in the larger context of power relations.

A fundamental shift in the locus of creativity is found in actor-network theory and the sociology of translation, particularly Latour (1987) and Callon (1986), whose approach "decenters the study of creativity from humans" (Bartels & Bencherki 2013, p. 5), conceptualizing it as "a process that takes place continually, rather than as an isolated event" (Bartels & Bencherki 2013, p. 6). Creativity does not directly result from actants—be they human or nonhuman—interacting with one another but has a hybrid constitution. All creative acts and the creative process itself are embedded in, and shaped by, the network dynamics of given cultural and material elements. Scholars of actor-network theory view new scientific ideas as emerging from an intricate set of actants (e.g., scientists, scientific theories, and lab equipment). The idea of creativity as a form of embedded agency is relatedly suggested by Deleuze (1998), who views creativity "as the making of configurations" or "new relations. . . between elements in order to make up new beings, bodies, concepts, products, or things" (Bartels & Bencherki 2013, p. 1).

Elias's (1993) study of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the famous eighteenth-century Austrian composer, puts audiences at the center of the sociology of creativity. In his account of Mozart's life, several sociological elements of creativity are visible, notably the constraining and enabling power of the social structure in establishing creative genius, be it social class dynamics or audience characteristics. To contextualize the story: Mozart was trained to take up a coveted position with an influential aristocrat at the Salzburg court. Not willing to pander to the tastes of his employer, Mozart sought to assert his creative autonomy by finding favor with a bourgeois audience in Vienna but was thwarted because the bourgeoisie was not powerful enough—yet—to ensure his music was accepted and promoted. However, this same audience would allow the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven—born 14 years after Mozart—to achieve creative autonomy. What Elias's study illustrates is that audiences, far from being passive, shape the creative process and power dynamics by their evaluations of creativity.

The contested and contentious nature of audiences is central to Bourdieu [1993, 1996 (1992)], who, like other French sociologists, never uses the word creativity but develops an overarching theory of artistic and cultural novelty that can inform the sociology of creativity (Chan 2017). He argues that creative producers compete to accumulate various forms of capital—be it symbolic or economic—by following as well as challenging conventions in their field. In seeking to cater to competing (sometimes irreconcilable) audience expectations, they end up surprising some of them—since unexpectedness depends on concurrent considerations and their knowledge of the field.

A more recent treatment of creativity in social theory involves addressing the issue of structuration, or how individual actions aggregate into the social structure, which either constrains or enables them (Giddens 1984). Accordingly, Joas (1996) introduces a comprehensive theory of social action centered explicitly on the concept of creativity (*Kreativität* in German). He argues that every action can entail creativity. Even the most routinized practices and thoughts must adapt to the demands of a specific context, often without time for reflection, normative guidance, or

both. This links to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus, according to which individuals' practices (what they do) and representations (what they think) are shaped by their collective socialization yet enacted in concrete settings, thus allowing for newness (Dalton 2004). Joas's work establishes creativity as a key concept in social theory.

### **Laying Out a Sociological Definition of Creativity**

The preceding section highlights the linguistic and conceptual diversity surrounding the creativity concept in sociology and the intellectual endeavor that underpins efforts to establish a sociology of creativity. Despite sociologists' long association with creativity, it has not been fully recognized, probably because the term creativity was not coined until the mid-twentieth century, notably in psychology (as detailed in the section titled *The Standard Definition of Creativity in Psychology and How It Relates to Sociology*). To remedy this, the key assumptions and principles underlying sociological thinking on creativity are set out below.

First, creativity is a configuration of cultural and material elements. It stems from a combination of symbols, ideas, or objects (according to Durkheim and Tarde) that is enabled by work practices (Marx) and configured with the continuous interplay of various constraints and stakeholders (Latour and Callon). The process of combination and configuration is thus a collective endeavor stemming from groups or organizations (Durkheim and Weber) and socialization (Elias). It is the outcome that is potentially creative, not necessarily the producers themselves (Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Latour and Callon). Creativity as a configuration is found not only in the highest forms of art but also in daily activities (Joas).

Second, creativity is intentional in the sense that it is not the result of chance events or pure randomness occurring beyond the reach of social actions. Rather, it relies on human labor (Marx), interactions (Durkheim), and organization (Weber). This is not to imply a total absence of randomness in the creative process. We cannot fully explain—much less predict—why a particular combination of elements (Tarde) is seen as more creative than another, precisely because there is a certain randomness in any process of configuration. Note that intentionality applies to configurations, not unexpectedness: While configurations that can potentially be considered creative are always preceded by intentionality, unexpectedness is often independent of the original intention. Such dynamics are salient in the culture industry, where producers' noncreative intention—be it making a profit or achieving social domination (Adorno and Horkheimer)—sometimes translates into a cultural offering that surprises consumers and hence garners a shared perception of creativity.

Third, the configuration of elements must be unexpected for a given audience to be deemed creative. Unexpectedness is in the eyes of the audience that consumes and assesses what producers have to offer—each audience member looking through their own interpretive lens (Bourdieu). Since their prior knowledge and expectations will vary significantly, creativity judgments are by nature contentious (Elias). To be deemed unexpected does not come lightly (Bourdieu), as it depends on the audiences' shared history, conventions, and evolving tastes. Moreover, producers shape the creative process and its outcome by projecting their own creative idiosyncrasies onto the evaluating audience to increase the perceived unexpectedness of a product (Adorno and Horkheimer). Creativity, therefore, is located at the intersection of production and consumption—the two sides of the creative process competing for what should be seen as unexpected, a key feature of modern capitalism (Marx, Weber, and Adorno and Horkheimer).

Integrating the above assumptions and principles, we arrive at a definition of creativity as an intentional configuration of material and cultural elements that is unexpected for a given audience. Below, we consider how this definition relates to concepts in contemporary sociology and compare the sociological approach with works in allied disciplines.

## THE MANY CONCEPTUAL FACETS OF CREATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

### Concepts Related to Creativity in Sociology

In recent years, creativity research in sociology has focused on the process of assessing cultural output and the diversity of evaluating audiences—a view that aligns with our definition of creativity. For example, Uzzi & Spiro (2005, p. 447) capture the creativity of Broadway musical artists “in terms of the financial and artistic performance of the musicals they produced,” acknowledging both commercial and critical success as salient evaluation criteria (Becker 1982). In the video games industry, De Vaan et al. (2015) introduce and operationalize the concept of game changers by measuring novelty based on features (inventiveness) and recognition made by industry experts (critical acclaim). This example suggests that sociologists comprise an audience of their own in the chosen empirical setting in which they develop creativity measures by defining and leveraging standardized criteria (such as inventiveness) or combining existing ones.

If sociologists rarely evoke the semantics of creativity, it may be because they tend to resort to related concepts such as originality, knowledge, innovation, atypicality, and consecration to describe and explain phenomena pertaining to creativity. While this list is by no means exhaustive—indeed, we hope it will be fine-tuned by further research—it reflects the relative salience of conceptual development in sociological research. We identify and review these related concepts to derive further insights about creativity.

Originality is often evoked when describing or defining creativity (Acar et al. 2017). Since its foundational role in Merton's (1968) early studies of modern science, originality has been redefined and expanded to evaluate scholarship in the social sciences, humanities, and history (Guetzkow et al. 2004)—thereby revealing a degree of interdisciplinary variance in terms of where originality is most valued. Social scientists value originality in method, whereas humanists and historians value originality in approach—reinforcing the notion that creativity is in the eye of the beholder. Although the term is often used synonymously with creativity (Guetzkow et al. 2004), since they both imply elements of surprise, there is a significant difference between the two. While originality has moral undertones—it is associated with a strong work ethic and a certain moral superiority of the focal individual—creativity does not; its locus lies in the output itself (rather than the creator) and thus cannot be subjected to a moral imperative. Indeed, attempts to view it that way have been resisted by sociologists (Osborne 2003).

A second related concept is knowledge. Recent developments in the sociology of knowledge, notably science and technology studies (Latour 1999) and social network analysis (Burt 2004), shed light on the emergence of what is unexpected from a network structure. Scholars in the science and technology studies tradition focus on the emergence of new ideas or objects from intricate networks involving both humans and nonhumans, while those in the social network analysis tradition focus on the emergence of shared ideas or representations (i.e., knowledge) from a specific configuration of social networks or interpersonal connections. Underlying these research streams and what differentiates knowledge from creativity is the assumption that knowledge is a cumulative process. Here, cumulativeness implies improvement: New knowledge makes existing knowledge better, at least within the bounds of normal science (Kuhn 1962). Creativity, in contrast, does not imply improvement. When elements are rearranged in such a way that the outcome surprises audiences, it is said to be creative—whether or not it is better than existing alternatives. For example, the sudden appearance of Elayne as an alternative spelling to Elaine (Liebersohn & Bell 1992, p. 518) did not improve the existing repertoire of first names in the United States, but its unexpectedness generated a shared perception of creativity.

Innovation often appears together with, or in place of, creativity. While in management research, innovation is regarded as the implementation (execution) of creativity (new ideas)

(Govindarajan & Trimble 2010), this does not align with the sociological perspective, where creativity is found in the actual creation. Innovation, the tangible counterpart to knowledge, is focused on concrete improvement and seen as antithetical to fashion (Gronow 2009), which is more about unplanned, recurrent changes. For instance, sociologists who study innovation examine changes in organizational or institutional arrangements to explain variances in rates of market innovation (Dahlin 2014), while sociologists who study fashion examine the popularity of cultural elements such as styles (Godart & Galunic 2019) and newborns' names (Lieberson & Bell 1992). The conceptual tension between innovation and fashion underlines an important facet of the sociology of creativity—i.e., that it attempts to explain the emergence of what is new and improved (innovation) and what is reinterpreted from existing elements (fashion). Note, however, that the fashion industry is a place of stylistic innovation [e.g., haute couture (Aspers & Godart 2013)] and thus should not be conflated with fashion as change.

A related concept is atypicality or “novel combinations of prior work” (Uzzi et al. 2013, p. 468), which was developed using an algorithmic approach to infer from empirical data the market positioning of cultural products vis-à-vis one another (Askin & Mauskopf 2017, Goldberg et al. 2016). It is sometimes studied interchangeably with inconsistency (Sgourev & Althuizen 2014), which is also used to capture objective differences among products. While research on atypicality recognizes the processual significance of combining elements—as is characteristic of creativity research—it often ignores (or considers separately) the evaluative dimension of participants in favor of second-order observers' (i.e., scholars) findings (Fuchs 2005).

Consecration, rooted in the dynamics of evaluation, measures the success of cultural producers in terms of institutional recognition [Bourdieu 1996 (1992)], be it movie awards (Cattani et al. 2014) or The Booker Prize for Fiction in anglophone literature (Childress et al. 2017). While creativity derives from the merits of the focal outcome, consecration involves other evaluative factors, such as the legitimacy of producers and the market power of their sponsors. Naturally, consecration research highlights the role of institutions in creativity dynamics and contextualizes creativity within a population rather than an individual (Accominotti 2018). While creativity does not have to be recognized through consecration, it is often subjected to the influence of the consecrating institution.

To summarize, reviewing creativity in relation to related constructs helps us define what creativity is and is not. While originality has moral overtones (e.g., a strong work ethic), creativity is concerned with the output rather than the producer. While knowledge implies cumulative improvement, something creative is not necessarily better than existing alternatives. Creativity encompasses multiple types of change (from innovation to fashion) rather than just one. Whereas atypicality is used to find objective ways of capturing novelty, creativity is inherently contested and involves multiple audiences. Creativity may be linked to consecration, albeit it does not require institutional validation. We see the study of creativity as a bridge between the disparate literatures surrounding these concepts in sociology. Indeed, for example, some scholars have already begun leveraging a sociological understanding of creativity to explain the connection between scientific innovation and cultural evolution (Kilduff et al. 2011).

## **The Standard Definition of Creativity in Psychology and How It Relates to Sociology**

Creativity research exists in several disciplines, notably psychology (and the micro organizational behavior tradition in management research), where it constitutes a subdiscipline in its own right. Its roots date back to Guilford's (1950) presidential address to the American Psychological Association. Although coined in the second half of the nineteenth century, the term creativity gained



wider currency only after World War II. Its growing importance in psychology was followed by increasing usage in English, French (*créativité*), and German (*Kreativität*) (Nelson 2015). Its continued salience in psychology is reflected in several longstanding scientific journals dedicated to the topic: *The Journal of Creative Behavior* (first issued in 1967; 2018 impact factor: 1.262), *Creativity Research Journal* (first issued in 1988; 2018 impact factor: 1.130), and *Creativity and Innovation Management* (first issued in 1992; 2018 impact factor: 2.015).

Although this often remains implicit, in the psychology literature, creativity is essentially conceived as an individual ability (Ganzaroli & Fiscato 2011, p. 267), even when it is captured and measured through products and ideas and when the social context is taken into account. To date, creativity research has been categorized as “the personality approach, the cognitive approach, and the sociocultural approach” (Sawyer 2012, p. 4). The latter concerns the influence of social factors on individuals’ creative endeavors and falls within the realm of social psychologists and hence is most relevant to sociologists’ consideration of the topic.

Social psychologists and management scholars largely converge on the notion of creativity as seen in the generation of a product or idea that experts consider “novel and appropriate, useful, correct or valuable” (Amabile 1996, p. 35)—often shortened to “novel and useful” or “novel and appropriate” (Sternberg & Lubart 1999). This standard definition (Runco & Jaeger 2012) assumes that creativity is in the eye of the beholder (Csikszentmihályi 1996). It continues a long tradition of definitional work in social psychology starting with Stein (1953, p. 311), for whom “the creative work is a novel work that is accepted as tenable or useful or satisfying by a group at some point in time”—one that includes social elements that are compatible with the sociological view of creativity but is rooted in psychology in that it assumes that external audiences with relevant knowledge (i.e., experts) are best placed to evaluate what is creative (or not). It has been formalized in a systematic, expert-based evaluation approach known as the consensual assessment technique (John & Sharon 2009).

The study of creativity in (social) psychology is characterized by precise empirical distinctions. Participants are asked about their understanding of creativity; novelty and usefulness are measured separately (Hildreth & Anderson 2016) with varying weights (Diedrich et al. 2015). Other scholars have added elements such as surprise (or nonobviousness) (Boden 2004), flair (Gaut 2010), and aesthetics. One study expands the dimensions of creativity to four: novelty, utility, aesthetics, and authenticity (Kharkhurin 2014). This underscores the main definitional challenge for creativity in psychology—it is a lexical concept (Evans 2010) composed of multiple components, each needing to be defined separately. Since it is not clear which ones should be considered or how they should be weighted, the definition remains ambiguous, contested, and evolutive (Acar et al. 2017). Dubbed “a notoriously slippery term” (Koppman 2016, p. 292), creativity means different things to different scholars, particularly in interdisciplinary settings such as management departments. Such fundamental disagreement over its conceptual and empirical underpinnings is bound to impede scientific progress and change over time.

Sociologists rarely invoke the standard definition of creativity as championed by social psychologists and management scholars.<sup>4</sup> Clearly the sociology of creativity differs from its psychological counterpart in many ways. While for psychologists, the bearers of creativity (Klausen 2010) are individuals who can improve on their creativity—for example, by embracing multicultural experiences (Leung et al. 2008), a specific curiosity mindset (Hagtvedt et al. 2019), or mind-body dissonance where mental states collide with physical experience (Huang & Galinsky 2011)—for sociologists, creativity is a configuration of elements. If psychologists use products to evaluate

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<sup>4</sup>A quick search in *ASR*, *AJS*, and *Social Forces* shows that Teresa Amabile’s work—at the heart of the standard approach—is cited only four times (twice in *ASR* and twice in *AJS*) as of August 2019.

creativity in their work, it is ultimately because products are easier to assess than individuals (Klausen 2010). They emphasize the importance of both novelty and usefulness for an individual to be deemed creative. In contrast, sociologists are more eclectic: For them, novelty is a prerequisite of creativity, but usefulness may or may not be considered. While psychologists seem to rely on expert evaluations for the sake of objectivity, sociologists recognize audience diversity and the political nature of evaluation. As indicated with respect to atypicality, objectivity for sociologists is found in second-order observers' algorithmic treatment of data. The notion that creative evaluation is essentially contestable and contested is largely absent from psychology.

## **The Economics of Creativity and Its Impact on Sociology**

Economists have a wealth of knowledge relevant to the study of creativity—albeit they rarely use the term—on firm or industry-level outcomes and processes such as innovation (Arora et al. 2004) and on microdrivers such as the creative process and creative act (Weitzman 1998), building on a combinatorial view. They acknowledge creativity's importance for endogenous economic growth (Aghion & Howitt 1992), often with reference to creative destruction (Schumpeter 1942), notwithstanding the latter's critical view. More recently, economists have looked at the factors that explain the emergence of inventors (i.e., patent holders) (Bell et al. 2018) and scientific innovators (Azoulay et al. 2011).

Economists' studies of creativity have influenced sociologists—for example, Caves (2000), who focuses on contract theory (see also Ceulemans et al. 2011) to analyze the key principles that drive the creative industries (i.e., various formal agreements that bind agents within a context of high uncertainty). Galenson (2011) looks at the influence of career stages on artists' productivity, whom he categorizes as experimental innovators (over a lifetime) or conceptual innovators (who achieve a breakthrough early on), observing a fall in the average age of their creativity peak between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Revisiting Galenson's theory from a sociological point of view, Accominotti (2009) explains this variance as a function of the relative importance of artistic movements.

Connecting insights from economics and sociology to understand creativity, Menger's (2014) theory of action integrates the economist's focus on intention and the future with the sociologist's grasp of the past (Fabiani 2016). For Menger, the creative industries are a winner-take-all or superstar environment (Rosen 1981) where small differences in talent can lead to huge differences in success and acclaim—as in the case of Beethoven, whose outstanding achievements cannot be solely explained by social factors: It was “difference in talent” (Menger 2014, p. 143) that marked not only his career but the history of music.

## **ANTECEDENTS OF CREATIVITY: STRUCTURE, INSTITUTIONS, AND CONTEXT**

Understanding the antecedents to creativity often involves analyzing factors that enhance an individual's creative output. For psychologists, individuals are the bearers of creativity. Applying the five-factor model (or big five personality traits), psychologists have found that people who are “more open to new experiences, less conventional and less conscientious, more self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, dominant, hostile and impulsive” are more creative (Feist 1998, p. 290). Embedding this in the organizational setting, Amabile (2013, p. 135) posits that “creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in support for creativity.” Taking a radical departure from a focus on individuals, sociologists have contextualized the psychological

understanding of creativity. As summarized by Reckwitz (2017, p. 147), “creativity [has become] the center of a whole psychological program for the conduct of life and the performance of everyday practice.” From this point of view, the search for individual antecedents to creativity is fundamentally normative, a *dispositif* (Foucault & Gordon 1980) to maintain the existing power structure that strives to convince creative workers to trade job security and protection for an elusive creative accomplishment of the self (McRobbie 2018, Reckwitz 2017).

The sociological antecedents to creativity highlight structural, institutional, and contextual factors. First, there is the notion that creativity derives from network structure (Burt 2004, Fleming et al. 2007, Perry-Smith 2006, Reagans & Zuckerman 2001) and hence is an outcome of relations (Collins 1998). No act of creation happens in isolation (Giuffrè 2009)—it is the result of ideas and material exchange flowing through connections in a given field (Basov 2018). Beyond cultural and material resources, networks give access to legitimacy, status (Godart & Mears 2009), and diverse cultural knowledge (Jang 2017). The optimal position for creativity is debated between the periphery, the core, and somewhere in between—an intermediary position on the semiperiphery that gives access to both fresh ideas and legitimacy (Cattani & Ferriani 2008). This network perspective advances understanding of how change in the social structure leads to the emergence of creative ideas, as in the Cubist movement, which emerged from a structural change to a more open society in early twentieth-century Paris (Sgourev 2013). For sociologists, then, what appears to be individual creativity is in fact the outcome of underlying collective mechanisms (Accominotti 2018) and broader dynamics such as the rate of change in a given field (Teodoridis et al. 2019) or the collapse of a major player that opens up space for renewed creativity (Cattani et al. 2018).

Every social system can be expected to distribute creativity rewards and recognition by various institutions (e.g., educational or award-granting organizations); what matters sociologically is how creativity is actually produced (Lena 2019). Moreover, it is because creative producers are willing to accept uncertainty and entry barriers are low that there are so many participants in cultural markets (Menger 2014). Small differences in talent, or even luck, can drive creativity. Indeed, creativity can just happen to individuals who are not necessarily seeking to be creative (Sgourev 2016).

Despite fundamental differences in approach, sociologists can also benefit from tracing developments in social psychology (Corte et al. 2019). Simonton (1988), in his change configuration theory, roots creativity in a combination of elements, which themselves are a function of individual and contextual factors. When a set of elements and their combined actions are positively valued by a given audience, the consequential configuration of elements is retained as creative objects or ideas (Stumpf 1995). While Simonton (1988) does not explicitly invoke social structure, his reasoning is consistent with the idea that social factors affect not only the elements available to the creating entity (be it an individual or organization) but also the way that it configures those elements. In turn, the evaluation of a creative object is influenced by the social context (Simonton 1999). Seeking greater integration across the social sciences, Simonton (2004) later links the history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology of creativity in a single framework. History focuses on chance, philosophy on logic, psychology on genius, and sociology on the *Zeitgeist*. He places *Zeitgeist* at the core of the sociology of creativity: Given a certain context, certain innovations are inevitable or constrained. Indeed, much of his work in this vein is an attempt to understand how far the sociological context has a deterministic influence on creativity through the elements available to the creating entity and the criteria by which configurations are evaluated.

Central to the sociological determinants of creativity are structure, institutions, and context, underlining the idea that most creative endeavors cannot be attributed to individuals in isolation (Burns et al. 2015). Management scholars may invoke group or organizational creativity, yet they often aggregate individual-level theories on creativity (Audia & Goncalo 2007) or examine

it through the lens of group decision making within organizations (Harvey & Kou 2013). They also limit the investigation to group creativity within organizations (Elsbach & Kramer 2003, Hargadon & Bechky 2006). A sociology of creativity broadens these perspectives by suggesting field-level analyses.

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF CREATIVITY: AUDIENCES, PERCEPTION, AND EVALUATION**

The argument that creativity is about what is retained from the creative producer's initial pool of probabilistic element-combinations based on the potential to surprise relevant audiences (Simonton 1999) highlights the perceptual nature of creativity. It implies that creativity is not an inherent property of ideas, processes, and products but the embodiment of an iterative relationship between the creator and their broader context. Insofar as variations in selective retention persist across engaged actors, being creative and the outcome of being considered creative are continuously negotiated.

The notion of relevant audiences has gained attention among psychology and management scholars, with a focus on the role of internal observers such as supervisors (e.g., Jia et al. 2014) and peers (e.g., Amabile et al. 2005), the underlying assumption being that the creative system (of the individual or organization) evaluates its own outcome based on a shared understanding of its identity, beliefs, and preferences. While usefully directing attention to how competing variations are tested against relevant criteria (Kaufman 2004), it stops short of considering external observers in the broader social structure (George 2007, Leung & Sharkey 2014) as part of the relevant audience. With technology enabling more people to engage in the novelty-generation process (Beck et al. 1994), evaluating audiences and creativity criteria have become incredibly diverse and distributed, rendering irrelevant the discussion of appropriate observers achieving agreement. The sociology of creativity, with its built-in connections to structural, institutional, and contextual antecedents, thus provides a useful analytical framework for studying the emergence of creativity across numerous interfaces between creator and audience.

In sociology, external audiences and their subjective evaluations are crucial to the study of cultural fields (Bourdieu 1993). The role of gatekeepers (Hirsch 1972)—critics, analysts, or editors—in cultural production is considered by scholars of the creative industries (Seong & Godart 2018, Smits 2016) to have a significant influence on the interpretive dynamics of the evolution of the field. As mediators, gatekeepers are well placed to theorize (Strang & Macy 2001) or set tastes around a particular process or outcome (Bourdieu 1984, Hirsch 1972), thereby influencing how other actors respond to, and work with, the trending axes of demand and preferences in a given field (Abrahamson & Eisenman 2008). Since power dynamics and expectations are by nature ambiguous, attention allocated by external audiences across competing configurations is bound to vary. Critics and peers, each embodying a distinctive selection system (Wijnberg & Gemser 2000), allocate symbolic legitimacy differentially across the field's core and peripheral players (Cattani et al. 2014). Similarly, critics (insiders) and the public (outsiders) confer attention on different cultural elements (Hsu 2006), all of which suggest that the sociology of creativity can usefully inform sociocognitive mechanisms of innovation and their diffusion (Rossman 2012).

The question of what makes cultural or creative goods successful is central to sociology. Since defining success as it relates to creativity inherently involves multiple, oft-conflicting viewpoints, scholars measure creativity in numerous ways. This seeming fragmentation of the field serves to validate the concept's versatility as a driver of competitive success and economic growth, as seen in the so-called creative class (Florida 2002). While scholars focus on creativity as a dependent variable that can be explained by individual (e.g., personality and skills) or contextual mechanisms

(e.g., social structure, organizational culture, and incentives), creativity is a versatile predictor of many underexplored phenomena of our time, such as performance variance in the context of a distributed attention economy. Such a perspective is also useful to explore its adverse effects on collectives such as workers and social groups (Khessina et al. 2018), notably the precarious conditions in which many creative workers live and work (McRobbie 2018) and the deployment of artistic careers trying to strike a balance between “love and money” (Gerber 2017, p. 8).

## DISCUSSION

### Some Implications of the Proposed Sociological Definition of Creativity

The above review of creativity research spanning time and space has enabled us to identify specific sociological elements of creativity and to arrive at a definition of creativity as an intentional configuration of cultural and material elements that is unexpected for a given audience. This can be applied at multiple levels—the individual, group, or organization as a whole—since they all engage in the configuration of elements to be interpreted and assessed by others (i.e., audiences). Albeit each level of analysis brings its own challenges, such as the inefficiency associated with exchanging ideas in groups (Paulus & Yang 2000) or adding newcomers to teams (Perretti & Negro 2007), none seems to invalidate our definition. The theoretical and empirical constituents of our definition are unpacked below, using examples.

First, in sociology, creativity unfolds in the outcome, not the actor. The so-called bearers of creativity are specific configurations of cultural and material elements rather than the individuals who combine them. While individuals are conventionally seen as the source of creativity (Reckwitz 2017), it may be that the link between causality and creativity needs to be reconsidered (see Crosby 2009) and that the perceived creativity of configurations provides a certain stability against which individual creators are accorded creativity. For example, in the context of new venture creation, entrepreneurs allow new ideas and goals to emerge organically by combining the elements available to them, such as new technology, product features, and consumer feedback. They experiment with ongoing iterations of the original element-combinations until the new product offering achieves the most coveted product-market fit—typically acclaimed in the form of increased sales or positive product or service reviews when the new product has enough variability to surprise the target consumers.

Second, creativity in sociology is inherently collective. Every creative act is embedded in larger structures, institutions, and contexts that enable or constrain creative configurations (Weber 2005). Intentionality is thus a central tenet of creativity: It distinguishes it from randomness, albeit the latter plays a part in the creative act (e.g., its inspiration or implementation). In fashion, for instance, the creative process unfolds in a sequence of activities, from comparing stylistic evolutions across multiple cities to attending fairs, negotiating with suppliers, and making design iterations if a competitors’ stylistic choices are discovered. Not all individual fashion designers or design teams follow the same creative process. Some are design-driven (*haute couture*), others market-driven (*prêt-à-porter*) (Cillo & Verona 2008), but all share the intention to create a fashion collection that is commercially viable. Some collections achieve unexpectedness—indeed, it has become a key advantage for survival—but in many cases, unexpectedness is born of a business intention, not a creative one. Whether creativity is found in painstaking labor or on the spur of the moment, it is always the result of intentionality, but not necessarily the intention to be creative.

Finally, creativity emerges from the unexpected, surprising the relevant audience. For example, creativity in jazz stems from the arrangement of notes, phrases, intonation, rhythm, audience reactions, and what the musician is playing or hearing and results in an unexpected musical

expression or experience. Live jazz incorporates audience reactions as the configuration happens in real time. Musicians either purposefully or accidentally provide something unexpected. Indeed, the jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk developed a style that is largely defined by the way it surprises audiences (Abbott 2005).

In our view, a sociology of creativity complements the current preeminence of psychology in understanding creativity and could generate fruitful interdisciplinary research. First, the evaluative criterion of usefulness or appropriateness is excluded from our definition, as for sociologists, creative output does not have to be useful to any given audience (e.g., Cubism in its nascent phase). Indeed, something may be judged creative long after it has entered a consideration set for evaluation (e.g., Mozart's musical canon). Furthermore, although creativity encompasses novelty, not everything that is novel is creative. The launch of a research project in a science lab or incremental innovation within a corporation (e.g., smartphones with bigger screens or higher resolution) may contain elements of newness but are not necessarily unexpected in the eyes of the audience. Creativity comes in many different forms and styles, and researchers have much to gain from comparing multiple creative logics, such as art versus science.

Second, the psychology of creativity is typically divided into four stages—preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification—but this has been challenged (Lubart 2001, p. 295), as these fail to locate creative endeavors in a social, material, and cultural context. Despite the importance of context or field (Amabile 1996, Csikszentmihályi 1990), psychologists do not go beyond making it an independent variable in the creativity equation, whereas sociologists locate creativity in real-world contexts, asking questions such as how experimental restaurants such as El Bulli manage change (Opazo 2018), how creative producers such as Los Angeles stand-up comics uphold creativity norms (Reilly 2018), how organizations such as Burning Man self-organize (Chen 2009), and how fashion houses react to each other's choices in reaching creative decisions (Godart & Mears 2009).

It also helps shed light on the fundamentally contested nature of creativity and its link to power and domination (Bourdieu 1993), especially when the appropriate or useful dimension is evoked. Although a useful paradox emerges from binding novelty and usefulness, both empirically and theoretically (Miron-Spektor & Erez 2017), from a sociological point of view, useless or nonuseful creations cannot simply be excluded from research. Sociologists need to make intellectual room for creative output that may not fit these descriptions.

While some attempt has been made to blend various conceptions of creativity, such as in Ford's (1996) integrative theory of individual creativity and in Simonton's (1999) work, it often ends up limiting the sociological perspective to narrow issues—for example, characterizing the sociological contribution to the study of creativity as “describing factors that constrain creative acts and facilitate conformity within collectives” (Ford 1996, p. 1116). The sociology of creativity cannot *a priori* be limited to a specific mechanism or domain.

Finally, in terms of research domain, although sociological research on creativity has to a large extent been conducted in the arts and creative industries, it is clearly not limited to this field. The creative industries and creativity can be separated into distinct conceptual categories. The creative industries offer a useful empirical setting to advance research on culture and change (Jones et al. 2015). The creativity of a given industry is a matter of degree or the focus of analysis. Even the stalest of industries has certain creative components, more so during dynamic periods. The creative industries are, first and foremost, dedicated to the generation of an economic surplus. As Jones & Maoret (2018, p. 1) explain, they “seek to generate and capture economic value from individuals' creative input and cultural expression.” This highlights two important facts: (a) that there is an exploitative dimension to creativity in the creative industries and (b) that creativity in its purest form can be found in these industries, and thus sociologists would benefit from studying them

more systematically, comparing and contrasting them, while not losing sight of their political and contested nature.

## Developing Research Around the Sociology of Creativity

We see several opportunities for building a sociological research agenda around creativity. First, the pervasive issue of sustainable development is of growing importance to scholars across disciplines. Sustainability and environmental issues have a long history in sociology (Pellow & Nyseth Brehm 2013); hence, a sociology of creativity could shed light on recent developments in the field, notably studies that connect the economy to nature and society (Kaup 2015). From an environmental point of view, creativity puts an emphasis on making something in pursuit of new product development and economic growth (Schumpeter 1939), which may ultimately lead to planned obsolescence, an ethical issue that has become critical to reflections on economic development and climate change (Joseph 2009). A relevant question is how creativity and sustainability could be combined, since they both seem desirable yet perhaps antithetical. Such a reflection also addresses trends in the sociology of consumption, notably around sustainable consumption and consumer activism (Warde 2015).

Second, and relatedly, while creativity is usually perceived as a positive force for both individuals and societies, it may also generate inequality. Study of the causes and consequences of inequality is central to sociology (Neckerman & Torche 2007), but locating creativity in such contexts has only recently started to attract attention (Long 2010). Scholars of economic geography have long recognized the role played by creativity and the creative industries in generating income inequality (Storper & Scott 2009) and have studied strategies individuals use to avoid being displaced, such as staying at the periphery (Grabher 2018). Sociologists could build on the knowledge accumulated in allied disciplines on this topic, with creativity as the common ground.

Third, the relationship between the sociology of culture and a sociology of creativity needs to be further explored. Culture and creativity are often used interchangeably—as in the case of the creative industries and cultural industries (or markets). Although creativity can be found beyond cultural settings, recent developments in the sociology of culture provide tools for the sociological approach to creativity that cannot be found in other disciplines. These include the notion of field-level social structures and networks (Pachucki & Breiger 2010), institutional logics (Friedland & Mohr 2004), and populations of cultural elements (Godart & Galunic 2019). All of these equip sociologists not only with ways to understand the constraints on creativity (Ford 1996) but also with procedures to conceptualize creative strategies in situ (Swidler 2001, Weber 2005). Given the prominence of the creative industries in the study of creativity in sociology, connecting culture and creativity should prompt associations with economic sociology and build on the study of the culture of markets (Wherry 2012)—namely, how cultural systems embedded in economic activity shape and define the creative process.

Finally, the question of how technological developments impact creativity is increasingly unavoidable for sociologists. With the rise of technology, the changing locus, process, and nature of creativity (Pedersen et al. 2019, Powell & Snellman 2004) demand a more holistic, structural view of creativity (i.e., a sociology of creativity rather than treating creativity as an absolute). Given the existence of a rich literature on artificial intelligence (AI) and creativity (Boden 1998), what would be the most productive use of sociological knowledge to study this topic? One suggestion is to explore AI's possible applications across the sociological landscape of creativity—for instance, identifying optimal configurations of elements and predicting or managing potential arenas of unexpectedness. In this sense, it is worth speculating on the question of intentionality when creativity is systematically carried out by first- or second-order AI systems.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have reviewed both classical and contemporary sociological research on creativity as well as relevant findings from allied disciplines. Our contribution has three dimensions. First, we have underscored the need for an integrated understanding of creativity that encompasses the social settings in which creativity is essential. This includes the so-called creative industries, such as fashion, film, music, and video games, to which creativity and cultural cues are central (Caves 2000), and indeed any context in which social actors rely on the generation of creative output, such as high-tech firms (Phillips 2001). Although the sociology of creativity and the sociology of creative industries are intertwined, the former should not be limited to the latter. Second, given the importance of creativity in careers and market dynamics, we have shed light on the sociological underpinnings of creativity in an effort to advance understanding of their increasingly contingent nature (Leschziner 2015, Mears 2011). Finally, since the sociology of creativity is intricately tied to neighboring subfields such as the sociology of innovation, of culture, and of knowledge—to name but a few—our review aims to spark interest among scholars in taking a more integrative approach, be it conceptual, theoretical, or empirical projects.

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