

THE TURN TOWARD CREATIVE WORK

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In this *Academy of Management Collections* essay, we curate a set of articles from the Academy of Management family of journals that showcase the evolution of creativity research within organizational scholarship. The articles reveal a shift from the study of creativity exclusively as an outcome to the broader study of the dynamics of “creative work”—efforts to achieve creativity, whether successful or not. The former—creativity as an outcome—represents the critical early, foundational work that legitimized the study of creativity in organizations, brought needed methodological innovations, and established definitional anchors. Our collection provides evidence of an expansion toward the latter—the dynamics of creative work—in recent years. Over time, researchers have focused more on process and relationships, discovering a dynamic interplay. The collected articles are selected not to be exhaustive but to provoke further theoretical and empirical scholarship on creative work as an inclusive umbrella, ideally leading to a broader, more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which varied creative work processes and the outcomes of those processes emerge.

The study of creativity by organizational scholars had a difficult birth, a vigorous youth, and a perilous brush with premature aging. It seems strange to imagine now, but, less than four decades ago, creativity was a topic disfavored by business academics. Yet, by 2007, it had been featured in so many prominent publications that the first issue of the *Academy of Management Annals* included a review and critique of organizational scholarship on creativity (George, 2007). Ominously, the conclusion of that review cautioned that the field was already showing signs of becoming moribund, “succumbing to a certain single-mindedness or routinization” (George, 2007: 466). Has this happened, or did research evolve as that *Annals* piece urged, embracing both “a more nuanced perspective” and a “big-pictured thinking” that addresses the “considerable hard work, effort, and sacrifices on the part of creators” (George, 2007: 466, 468)? We believe creativity

researchers have taken on this challenge, opening up exciting opportunities for the future. Our essay explores this evolution and its implications.

For this essay, we curated a set of articles from the Academy of Management family of journals that, we believe, showcase the evolution of theory and research on creativity within organizational scholarship. Our selection of these articles is meant to be both provocative and indicative of larger trends we see in the creativity literature, rather than a definitive list of the “best” or most highly cited articles. In reviewing these articles, we came to see that, collectively, they reveal a narrative arc that tells the story of a steady shift from focusing on *creativity as an outcome* to examining the processes of *creative work*. We adopt the definition of “creative work” as a “process in which ideas are generated, elaborated, evaluated, stored, discarded, or implemented into a product by individuals or groups” with the intent of developing something novel and useful (Rouse & Harrison). This definition emphasizes that “creativity might not only refer to an outcome but also to

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‘work’—effortfully engaging in behaviors, thoughts, and interactions—with the intention of producing novel and useful ideas” (Rouse & Harrison), building on the insight of Drazin and colleagues (1999: 287) that creativity can be thought of as the process of engaging in “creative acts.”

The focus on creativity as an outcome represents the critical early, foundational work that legitimized the study of creativity. Applied concerns about managing for creativity in organizations drove a theoretical focus on antecedents that would yield more creative outcomes. Motivated by these concerns, early work borrowed paradigms and theoretical conceptualizations from psychology, where the study of creativity was considerably more established. In doing so, this early work built definitional anchors, produced useful methodological innovations, and seeded vigorous growth in organizational research on “creativity”—which was, in most of this research, defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas, products, or processes (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996). The 2007 *Annals* review provided a moment to reflect and consider the possibility that creativity research in our field was putting individual creativity into a rather generic organizational context while ignoring theoretically thorny questions about how and why people attempt and persist in creative endeavors as they do their jobs. Our collection provides evidence of a turn toward research on *creative work*, an emergent focus on efforts to achieve creativity, whether successful or not, rather than solely focusing on outcomes.

The term “creative work” acts as an inclusive theoretical umbrella that includes the multitude of efforts that the creative process involves. It envelopes discrete process-oriented concepts like creative action (Unsworth & Clegg, 2010), creative process engagement (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), idea work (Carlsen, Clegg, & Gjersvik 2012), and innovative behavior (Scott & Bruce, 1994). The first two constructs (creative action and creative process engagement) emphasize the importance of effort and intention, rather than solely the outcome. The latter two constructs (creative process engagement and innovative behavior) emphasize the importance of process and posit that creative efforts do not cease with idea generation. In sum, in comparison to creativity viewed as an outcome, the construct of creative work is more process oriented, messy, interactive, and inclusive, in the sense that it encompasses the efforts of a broader array of actors whose efforts coalesce to account for creative outcomes—for example, not only idea generators, but also elaborators and evaluators of ideas.

As a result, scholarship on creative work reveals a willingness to expand the study of creativity in three important ways: (1) investigating creativity as an outcome, a process, or even an independent variable (Khessina, Goncalo, & Krause, 2018); (2) embracing a wider array of behaviors that include not only generating ideas, but also refining, pitching, storing, discarding, and implementing ideas; and (3) pushing beyond individual idea generators to include tight or loose collectives of individuals involved in a particular creative effort. Over time, researchers have focused more on process and relationships, discovering a dynamic interplay between individuals and their dyadic relationships, their social groups, and the contexts in which they are embedded (e.g., Berg, 2014; Gilson & Shalley, 2004; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010; Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015). In so doing, researchers have generated a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which different creative processes and outcomes emerge.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON CREATIVITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Although creativity is needed for progress in all human endeavors (James, 1880), it was long neglected as a subject of systematic research. Catalyzed by Guilford’s (1950) APA presidential address exhorting psychologists to study creativity, research from the 1950s through the 1970s focused almost exclusively on the traits and backgrounds of extraordinarily creative individuals. Starting in the late 1970s, researchers like Simonton (1975) and Amabile (1979) began to explore social and situational antecedents to creative outcomes, challenging the view that creativity was primarily a trait or individual difference. Social psychologists’ growing body of work showed that, under the right conditions, anyone could be creative. Cumulatively, their work highlighted the importance of not only expertise in a domain and general skill in creating thinking, which had already been studied by cognitive and personality psychologists, but also intrinsic motivation to engage in the work—the motivation to do work because it is interesting, satisfying, and personally challenging; intrinsic motivation, in turn, can be significantly influenced by the immediate social environment (Amabile et al., 1996). Given the potential value of creativity to organizations, management scholars began to take notice of findings from the social psychology of creativity in the 1980s and 1990s. Although management research had investigated “organizational innovation”—generally defined

as the implementation of novel, useful ideas by organizations or societies (Daft, 1982; Damanpour, 1991; Damanpour & Evan, 1984; Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbek, 1973)—there had been little mention of the individual, group, and contextual forces that facilitate the generation of new ideas.

Early organizational research on creativity, like early social psychological research, was largely concerned with identifying the antecedents of creative outcomes: In what ways do organizations promote and inhibit the creativity of their members? Gradually, the antecedent–outcome approach to studying individual creativity in organizations became an accepted and, rather quickly, a highly active field of inquiry for management scholars (George, 2007).

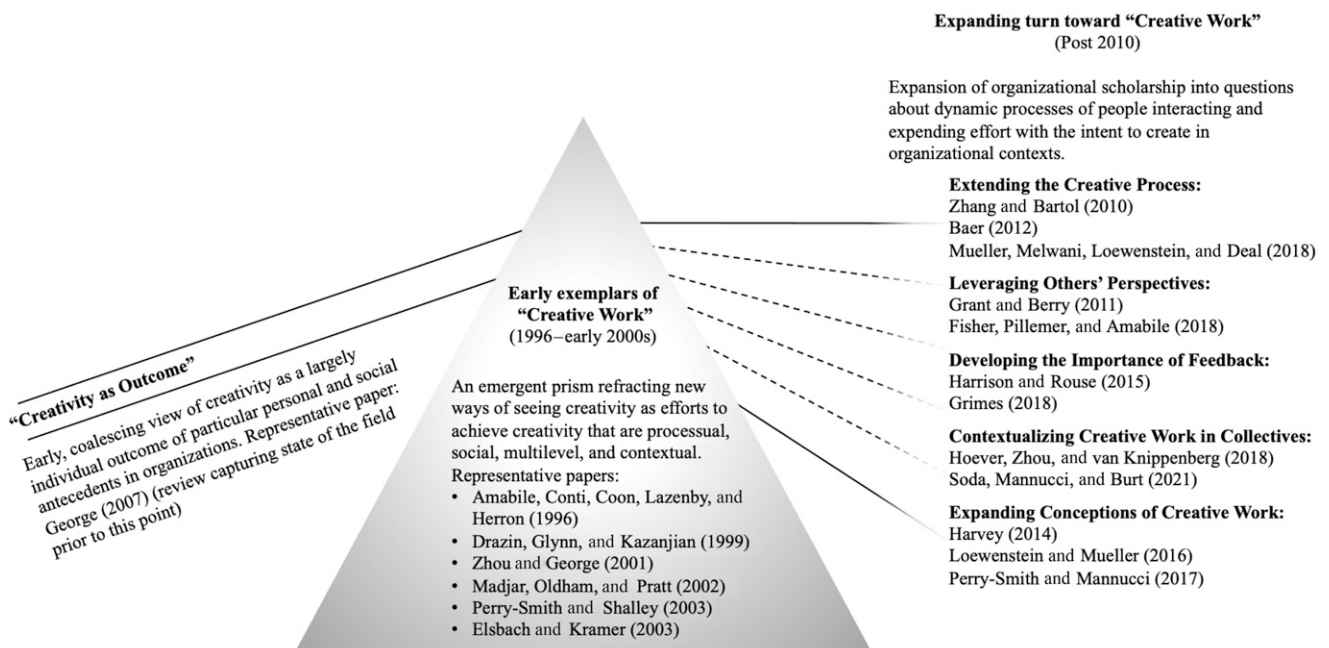
An Emerging Prism for Viewing Creative Work

As mentioned earlier, the *Annals* review (George, 2007) argued that the study of creativity in organizations was coalescing in a “single-mindedness”—a sort of narrow, focused beam of light on creativity as an outcome of individual employees’ behavior. In this section, we discuss a selection of six papers that, although not exhaustive, represent research shifting

away from this narrow focus—a shift that began in the 1990s. Metaphorically, each of these papers offered a new lens, a unique piece of glass that magnified a particular idea. But, combined retrospectively, they collectively act as a prism, refracting conceptions of creativity from a beam of focused light into a rainbow of new colors previously unseen. (Figure 1 provides a visual summary of this metaphor and Table 1 lists the articles in chronological order. In addition, Figure 2 provides additional evidence of this shift by illustrating the frequency of articles focusing on creativity over the last 40 years in two categories: Academy of Management journals and other prominent management journals.)

Amabile et al.’s (1996) study of creativity in context provided empirical grist for the shift toward examining creative work in the organizational literature. Their paper brings to the forefront the insight that had undergirded the social psychology of creativity somewhat earlier: “Departing from the traditional psychological approach to creativity, which focuses on the characteristics of creative persons (e.g., Barron, 1955; MacKinnon, 1965), we assume that the *social environment* can influence both the level and the frequency of creative behavior”

FIGURE 1
A Prism Metaphor Describing the Turn toward Creative Work

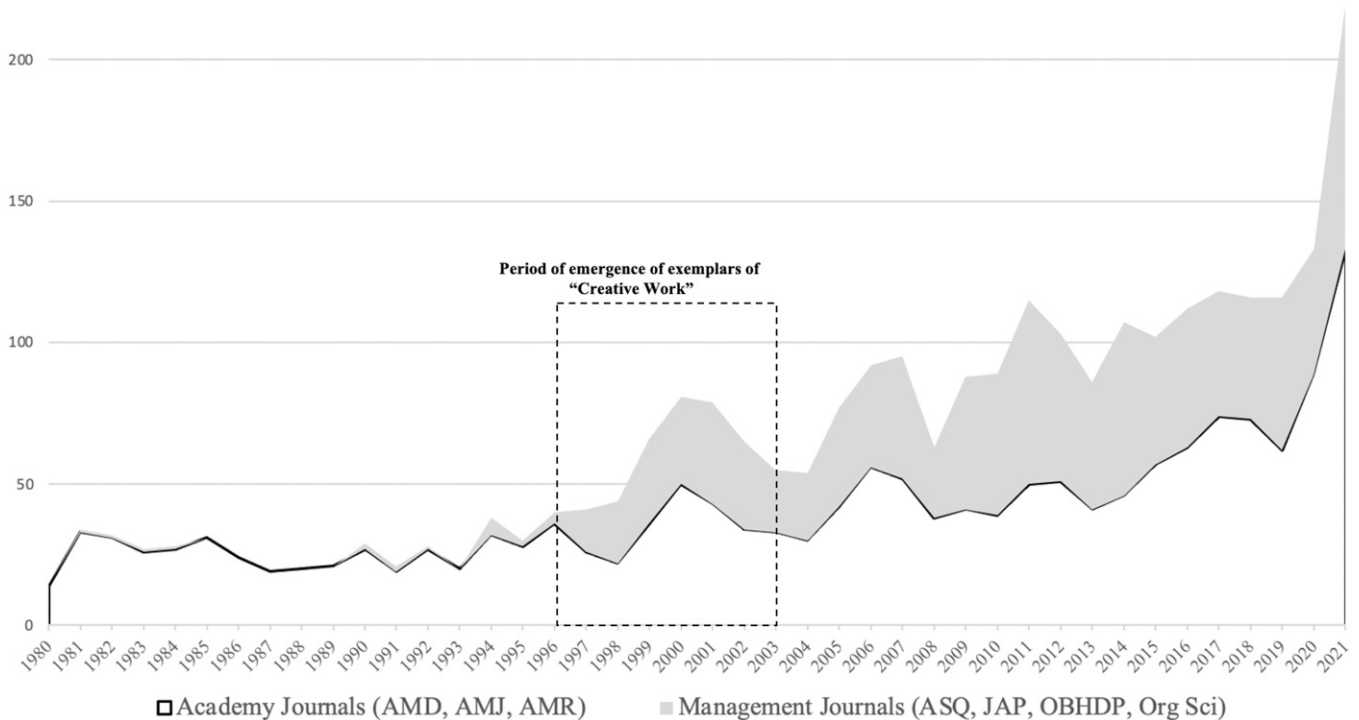


Notes: The six individual articles we highlight are meant to offer broader evidence of the turn toward creative work. Full citations for each paper are provided in the reference section. Here, we note which of the “creative work” categories each article might fit into followed by a brief description of why.

TABLE 1
Chronology and Role of Papers Included in the Collection

Year	Journal	Author(s)	Title	Role in turn to creative work
1996	AMJ	Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Herron	Assessing the Work Environment for Creativity	Foundational
1999	AMR	Drazin, Glynn, and Kazanjian	Multilevel Theorizing about Creativity in Organizations: A Sensemaking Perspective	Foundational
2001	AMJ	Zhou and George	When Job Dissatisfaction Leads to Creativity: Encouraging the Expression of Voice	Foundational
2002	AMJ	Madjar, Oldham, and Pratt	There's No Place like Home? The Contributions of Work and Nonwork Creativity Support to Employees' Creative Performance	Foundational
2003	AMR	Perry-Smith and Shalley	The Social Side of Creativity: A Static and Dynamic Social Network Perspective	Foundational
2003	AMJ	Elsbach and Kramer	Assessing Creativity in Hollywood Pitch Meetings: Evidence for a Dual-Process Model of Creativity Judgments	Foundational
2007	<i>Annals</i>	George	Creativity in Organizations	Foundational
2010	AMJ	Zhang and Bartol	Linking Empowering Leadership and Employee Creativity: The Influence of Psychological Empowerment, Intrinsic Motivation, and Creative Process Engagement	Extending the creative process
2011	AMJ	Grant and Berry	The Necessity of Others is the Mother of Invention: Intrinsic and Prosocial Motivations, Perspective Taking, and Creativity	Leveraging others' perspectives
2012	AMJ	Baer	Putting Creativity to Work: The Implementation of Creative Ideas in Organizations	Extending the creative process
2014	AMR	Harvey	Creative Synthesis: Exploring the Process of Extraordinary Group Creativity	Expanding conceptions of creative work
2015	AMJ	Harrison and Rouse	An Inductive Study of Feedback Interactions over the Course of Creative Projects	Developing the importance of feedback
2016	AMD	Loewenstein and Mueller	Implicit Theories of Creative Ideas: How Culture Guides Creativity Assessments	Expanding conceptions of creative work
2018	AMJ	Hoever, Zhou, and van Knippenberg	Different Strokes for Different Teams: The Contingent Effects of Positive and Negative Feedback on the Creativity of Informationally Homogeneous and Diverse Teams	Creative work in collectives
2017	AMR	Perry-Smith and Mannucci	From Creativity to Innovation: The Social Network Drivers of the Four Phases of the Idea Journey	Expanding conceptions of creative work
2018	AMJ	Mueller, Melwani, Lowenstein, and Deal	Reframing the Decision-Makers' Dilemma: Toward a Social Context Model of Creative Idea Recognition	Extending the creative process
2018	AMJ	Fisher, Pillemer, and Amabile	Deep Help in Complex Project Work: Guiding and Path-Clearing across Difficult Terrain	Leveraging others' perspectives
2018	AMJ	Grimes	The Pivot: How Founders Respond to Feedback through Idea and Identity Work	Developing the importance of feedback
2021	AMJ	Soda, Mannucci, and Burt	Networks, Creativity, and Time: Staying Creative through Brokerage and Network Rejuvenation	Creative work in collectives

FIGURE 2
Frequency of “Creativity” Publications in Academy of Management and Other Management Journals



Notes: Articles were counted if they included the words “creative” or “creativity” in the title or abstract. AMD = *Academy of Management Discoveries*; AMJ = *Academy of Management Journal*; AMR = *Academy of Management Review*; ASQ = *Administrative Science Quarterly*; JAP = *Journal of Applied Psychology*; OBHDP = *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*; Org Sci = *Organization Science*.

(Amabile et al., 1996: 1154–1155, emphasis added). The explicit focus on the social environment brought attention to the “social–psychological context” of the people attempting to carry out creative projects—that is, projects requiring useful novelty—in an organization. By assessing both how the people working on project teams perceived the social and organizational work environment of their projects, and how creative each project was ultimately judged to be by managers, the authors were able to elucidate which contextual elements promoted, and which undermined, the creativity of teams. For example, the study revealed that encouragement from both the organization and the immediate supervisor during the creative process were key, as were a collaborative work context within the team and a sense of freedom to explore possibilities in carrying out the project. Implicitly, this paper widened the theoretical aperture of creativity scholars in management, by calling attention to the complex contextual forces, including social interactions, that can affect effortful creative behavior in organizations, and by expanding the focus from individuals to teams. The other papers

build on this break from a tradition of focusing on individual production of creative outcomes to focusing on effortful attempts by collectives of individuals to engage in the creative process while surrounded by a myriad of social and organizational forces.

Following Amabile and colleagues’ (1996) lead, Drazin, Glynn, and Kazanjian (1999) anchored their multilevel theoretical discussion of creativity in project work, as well. They explicitly extended the definition of creativity to include not just successful efforts, but all efforts intended to further creativity, whether the ideas are successfully adopted or not:

In contrast to existing models, we define creativity as the process of engagement in creative acts, regardless of whether the resultant outcomes are novel, useful, or creative (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Ford, 1996). This process orientation focuses our inquiry on how individuals attempt to orient themselves to, and take creative action in, situations or events that are complex, ambiguous, and ill defined. (Drazin et al., 1999: 287)

This focus on creative attempts throughout the process carried additional implications that Drazin and colleagues explained. First, they noted a departure

from more individually focused models that assumed creativity over short durations on specific tasks. Instead, they suggested that, over a long-duration project, creativity involves multiple, shifting collaborations. Second, because individuals will be coming and going and because projects are inherently complex, creative efforts can not only occur as scheduled, identifiable tasks, but can also emerge wholly improvised, in the moment, as part of larger group or organizational endeavors. Third, the authors argued that time was an underdeveloped, yet critical, aspect of creativity: "We note that much of the creativity literature has ignored the dimension of time" (Drazin et al., 1999: 289).

By encouraging scholarly attention to effort, interaction among a shifting array of actors, and time, Drazin and colleagues' (1999) theorizing opened up new avenues for examining creativity in context and more explicitly presaged the eventual turn toward creative work. Zhou and George (2001) offered a compelling glimpse at one of these avenues in a study revealing that creativity depends heavily on both supportive coworkers and helpful feedback. Importantly, this pushed creative work away from simply focusing on an individual creator to explicitly incorporate individuals who were more peripherally involved in the creative process: feedback providers. This research implied that creative work was the purview not only of the person generating the idea or leading the project, but also of individuals providing inputs along the way. And this implication invited future research into the nature of these inputs: What sort of feedback is actually effective? How can creative workers best elicit useful feedback?

Research by Madjar, Oldham, and Pratt (2002) expanded researchers' view of the range of people who support creative work beyond the boundaries of the workplace. That is, they included people from both organizational life (supervisors and colleagues) and personal life (family and friends) as potential sources of support for sustaining creative work. Their findings revealed that work and nonwork support have independent influences on creative output. They encouraged future researchers to be even more inclusive in exploring relationships and connections that might encourage creative work—including even influences from childhood:

There is a need to examine whether support from particular individuals—a spouse or a coworker, for instance—has especially strong effects on employees' moods and creativity. Research is also needed to determine if support and encouragement of creativity from childhood families and friends have an impact

on the creativity of adult employees and if this impact is independent of the impact of support from the current work and nonwork sources investigated in this study. (Madjar et al., 2002: 765)

In sum, this study illustrated a further expansion of who might be involved in creative work, and explicitly highlighted the importance of relationships.

Theoretically, Perry-Smith and Shalley (2003) pushed these arguments further. They not only acknowledged that proximal coworkers influence creativity, but also suggested that creative workers are embedded in networks of relationships, and the nature of those network connections influences creativity. Specifically, Perry-Smith and Shalley (2003) hypothesized that creative individuals often begin their creative journey on the fringes of a social network, where they are more likely to have weak ties that allow them to combine new ideas without censure from others for violating shared assumptions. As their creative ideas gain traction, their networks change and they move from the fringes to the core of the network. The dynamism in this conceptualization is unmistakable—creative workers evolve, and, as their new ideas emerge and gain acceptance, their relationships shift. This paper not only conceptually codified the role of networks in creativity, but it also formalized a methodology for studying the impact of more distal creative work. Additionally, the paper argued for conceptualizing more complex dynamics within creativity, saying that "the connection between social relationship and creativity may be more complex than the one-way, direct, static relationship implied in previous work" (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003: 90).

Finally, Elsbach and Kramer's (2003) inductive study of Hollywood pitch meetings further crystallized these themes, showcasing the importance of seemingly ephemeral, emergent interactions in the success of creative efforts. This study revealed that Hollywood pitches succeed not due solely to the creativity of writers, but due also to the nature of the interaction these writers cultivate with producers. As one writer described it, speaking of producers, "You want to stimulate them, you want to get their curiosity going. And then you want them to be a team player with you" (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003: 296). Hence, the goal is not always simply to convince evaluators of how creative an idea is, as presented, but, often, to engage in a conversation that creates promising "hooks" for doing creative work together. Like some of the other papers in this section, this piece considered creativity as an unfolding process rather than simply an outcome.

Taken together, these six papers refracted the notion of creativity, shifting the lens for organizational scholarship from simply viewing creativity within organizations as an important outcome of individual behavior to envisioning a much broader foundation for understanding creative work: the *individual and collective efforts* directed at supporting or engaging in the *process* of producing novel and useful ideas. Each of the final 12 articles we have included in this collection emphasizes a mix of the ideas refracted from the six articles above. We cluster the articles around five issues that illustrate the growing emphasis on creative work, although we recognize that each article contributes to themes in other clusters, as well. For simplicity, each of the clusters juxtaposes an earlier article with later research building on the same theme, to showcase the scholarly development of each of these areas.

Extending Views on the Creative Process

A great deal of recent research has extended the field's understanding of the creative process. This work has included deeper examinations of activities that had been previously identified as part of the creative process, but were often ignored due to the field's rather single-minded focus on idea generation. Zhang and Bartol's (2010) article is important in this regard. Their work introduces a new construct: creative process engagement. Consistent with our discussion above, this construct highlights the role of effort, by measuring the degree to which individuals engage in a variety of activities critical to creative work, such as problem identification, information searching, and idea generation. Their study revealed that, along with intrinsic motivation, creative process engagement serves as a key mediator of the positive effect of empowering leadership on employee creativity. Although this article astutely recognized the need to understand the degree to which workers engage fully with the manifold elements of the creative process, it left open, for future research, questions of whether existing empirical evidence correctly and fully describes those elements, and how universal they are. Even so, it represents an important advancement in illuminating the creative process, by contributing new ways of measuring how individuals engage in the process.

Whereas the paper above focused primarily on the front end of the creative process, Baer's (2012) paper extended scholars' understanding of the back end of the process. Specifically, this study showed that organizational employees' ideas are more likely to

be implemented when those employees believe that they, personally, would enjoy benefits from such implementation, and when they have strong ties to people who can move their ideas along in the organization. In forcefully arguing that "the mere production of creative ideas does not ensure that those ideas are eventually implemented," Baer's (2012: 1114) work focused organizational scholars on the importance of understanding what happens after idea generation. This set the stage for later work on the conditions under which creative ideas survive, develop, and are recognized as worthy of implementation—or not.

Work by Mueller, Melwani, Lowenstein, and Deal (2018) pushed these ideas further by revealing that evaluators play a crucial role in creative work. Importantly, evaluators' efforts are not based solely on expertise but can be influenced by how they see their role. Individuals who see themselves in a "decision-maker" role are more likely to adopt an economic mindset that depresses their assessments of creativity. This suggests that mindset and motivation are important throughout the process of producing creative work—from the early inception of ideas to final decisions on the implementation of those ideas. As the authors of this paper noted, these findings suggest "a new interpretation of the longstanding puzzle of why organizations desire but often reject creative ideas" (Mueller et al., 2018: 94). Beyond the theoretical implications of this paper, there are several organizational implications: individuals attempting to advocate for new ideas must develop skills to overcome these economic mindsets; organizations must find ways to counteract or nullify these mindsets when decision-makers are evaluating the creativity of ideas; and decision-makers themselves must work to better understand how their role may interfere with their ability to evaluate creativity fairly.

Illuminating the Role of Outsiders

An important theoretical pivot occurred as scholars built on extended views of the creative process, such as those just described, and embraced questions about how ongoing social dynamics influence that process. As we noted earlier, Perry-Smith and Shalley (2003) showed that outsiders matter. Researchers and theorists of help have illuminated *how* they matter, by examining the ways in which creative workers interface with stakeholders and organizational colleagues. Grant and Berry's (2011) study expanded researchers' understanding of the

motivation for creative work, showing that the motivation to help others can significantly boost the positive effects of intrinsic motivation. This paper, reporting two survey studies in organizations and one experiment, revealed that individuals are more creative when they are both more intrinsically motivated and more prosocially motivated by the needs of outsiders—specifically, those who are served by their work. Prosocial motivation boosts creativity by leading workers to engage in perspective-taking, allowing them to produce novel ideas that are more useful for those who might benefit from them.

Fisher, Pillemer, and Amabile's (2018) inductive study of help given on design projects looked at creative workers not as the givers but as the receivers of help, finding that help from outsiders—in this case, high-level organizational leaders from outside the project team—can make a crucial difference for creative work. When still in progress, creative projects are difficult to understand and change quickly because of their complexity, knowledge intensity, and dynamism. For this reason, the simple, brief, one-time favors generally studied by organizational help researchers often fall short of meeting the true needs of creative workers. This study emphasized the amount of time and effort necessary to provide and receive help in complex, creative projects, and induced two forms of “deep help” that go well beyond brief encounters but, instead, are “characterized by deep, sustained engagement” (Fisher et al., 2018: 1524) with the problems the project team is facing. The “guiding” form of help involves working with the project team in several prolonged sessions tightly clustered in time (generally, over a few days), affording direct assistance with core issues and ideas. The “path-clearing” form of help, temporally and qualitatively distinct, involves compensating for a persistent deficit in the team's resources in briefer, intermittent helping sessions throughout the project's life.

Investigating the Importance of Feedback

Scholars have also put an increasing emphasis on the importance of outsiders and their perspectives by investigating the dynamic nature of feedback in creative work. Whereas earlier research had taken a static view, finding that feedback on creative work can be either informative or controlling (Zhou, 1998), Harrison and Rouse (2015) used an inductive study of feedback interactions to show that feedback unfolds as an ongoing conversation in service of developing an idea over time. Videotaped interactions in modern

dance and an award-winning R&D department revealed that both creative workers and feedback providers struggle with the emergence of novelty. As a result, each relies on a set of “moves” that allow them to understand the novelty of the new idea and the journey of the idea's development prior to the moment of providing feedback. These moves—for example, creative workers using “backgrounding” to explain the creative process they have used, or feedback providers using “personalizing” to explain their subjective reactions to a prototype—help to pinpoint effortful actions within creative work. How these moves combine reveals whether the feedback leads to subsequent changes in the prototypes or not. For example, one interesting reaction to feedback discovered in this study is “excavations”—when creative workers “dig up” ideas dismissed earlier in the creative process—as a response to feedback. In addition to these individual moves, a key insight overall is the significant hurdle that novelty presents to both creative workers and evaluators: both are struggling with the emergence of novelty (“What could this idea really become?”). Effective feedback provides guidance for creative workers, in part, by allowing them to explain the process they have already gone through to get there.

Grimes (2018), also using an inductive methodology, studied feedback given to entrepreneurs. This research revealed that feedback impacts creative workers' identities and showed how they change their ideas in response to feedback. The inductive model in this paper suggests that entrepreneurs not only respond to the informational value of feedback, but also wrestled with how the feedback impacted their psychological ownership of their idea and their identity as an entrepreneur. As a result of these different filters, feedback could be rejected not because of *what* is said or *how* it is said, but because of what it signals about *who* it is said to: “[the] findings reveal that identity-sharpening feedback practices not only highlight deficiencies in the proposed ideas, but also challenge individuals' self-concepts. As individuals respond to such feedback, they must consider adjusting not only their ideas, but also the extent to which their self-concepts are rooted in those ideas” (Grimes, 2018: 1712). Further expanding on the importance of feedback, this paper elucidated how individuals grapple with feedback both as information that can inform their ideas but also as information that can impact their identities. Hence, creative work involves efforts focused not just at developing an idea, but at how individuals develop their sense of self and the meanings they associate with their idea.

Understanding Creative Work in Collectives

Thematically interwoven into several of the papers described above is the importance of creative work within collectives. The two articles we discuss here further highlight the importance of creative work in groups. First, a paper by Hoever, Zhou, and van Knippenberg (2018) extended the arguments described above concerning the relationship between creative work and feedback. The team experiment reported in that paper revealed that the group context conditions the effectiveness of feedback, such that negative feedback increases information processing effort in informationally diverse teams and positive feedback increases cognitive flexibility in informationally homogenous teams. Taking a non-experimental approach to examining creative work in collectives, Soda, Mannucci, and Burt (2021) applied a network perspective to the creative workers associated with the TV series *Dr. Who* from 1963 to 2014. Results revealed that bringing in new creative workers provides a “shock” to those already in a creative network, pushing them to use their knowledge in new ways. These two studies, in addition to those discussed earlier, provide a strong empirical grounding for understanding creative work as occurring in a larger social context. Creative efforts are rarely the efforts of individuals acting solo, especially in contemporary organizations; creative efforts ripple and collide, get amplified or negated, in complex ways that we are just beginning to fully recognize.

Expanding Conceptions of Creative Work

The final three articles we highlight provide a theoretical bookend to the six earlier articles that began to expand the notion of creative work. These three articles expanded attention to activities in the creative process beyond the development of a single idea, and thereby act as inclusive theoretical webs pulling together the array of actors and efforts that are needed to fully realize a creative idea. Harvey (2014) provided a theory of creative synthesis in groups. The focus in this paper is on creativity as a collective effort in which “creative synthesis,” a process enabling a new way of understanding an idea, coevolves with the ideas that are products of this process. These ideas then become exemplars of what the process itself can produce: “The synthesis embodies a unique understanding of the problem or task that acts like a theory for producing ideas. The synthesis can therefore generate multiple exemplars, each of which can be a breakthrough” (Harvey, 2014:

337). Importantly, this paper pushed researchers to move beyond single-cycle models of creative work to understand that past creative efforts, whether successful or unsuccessful, provide a host of carry-over resources to future creative efforts. As a result, researchers are challenged to consider multi-loop creative efforts.

Work by Loewenstein and Mueller (2016) expanded our conception of creativity in a different direction—beyond the dominant U.S.-centered view. Specifically, rather than focusing on the process of creativity, they focused on cross-cultural differences in the interpretation of creativity itself. This paper reports that, across three studies using multiple methods, Chinese participants relied on a broader set of cues than did U.S. participants in saying what constitutes creativity. The authors observed, for example, that participants from the two cultures used cues like “paradigm shift” and “rare” quite differently in considering whether something is novel:

Most U.S. participants seemed to emphasize paradigm shift and rare more so than combination, updates tradition, and repurposing. Most Chinese participants seemed to emphasize potential more than rare and combination. Thus, it is possible that Americans respond to some kinds of novelty more than Chinese [people] and that Chinese [people] respond to other kinds of novelty more than Americans. (Loewenstein & Mueller, 2016: 336)

If different cultures attend to different cues as signifying creativity, it stands to reason that people in each culture will expend effort to produce ideas and products that demonstrate those particular cues. As a result, creative work likely feels very different for creative workers and looks very different to observers depending on their cultural backgrounds and the implicit theories they have adopted through their experiences.

Finally, Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017) pushed theory forward by outlining a stage model of creativity that explicitly joins creative work with innovation—the implementation of creative ideas. Their theorizing is expressly social, detailing the distinct needs of individual creators—cognitive flexibility, feedback and emotional support, influence and legitimacy, and shared understanding and vision—that map onto the four stages of the “idea journey”: idea generation, idea elaboration, idea championing, and idea implementation. This theory articulates the particular relational and structural elements of creative workers’ social networks that are most helpful at each stage of creative work. The authors thus expand conceptions of creative work by offering a social

networks view of creative process. This view reveals that creative work includes efforts to build and draw upon distinct social network features over the course of the idea journey, in order to move from idea generation to implementation.

Importantly, the paper by Perry-Smith and Manucci (2017) also allows scholars of creativity and scholars of innovation to discern a boundary, albeit a fuzzy one, between creative work and innovation. As noted by Rouse and Harrison, who initially defined creative work, the term “encompasses ... the entire life cycle of an idea within a project group”; that life cycle extends from idea generation through possible implementation. In organizational scholarship, innovation is generally defined as the implementation of creative ideas within an organization (e.g., Amabile et al., 1996). Thus, “creative work” generally refers to processes, from initial idea generation through implementation of the idea, in which at least a subset of the same individuals are involved. “Innovation,” by contrast, generally refers to processes across an organization that may include entirely different individuals at each stage.

In sum, the initial six articles that served as a prism helped to refract theorizing in a way that supported the emergence of the later five clusters of papers we summarized above. Collectively, these articles represent a shift in the literature from the consideration of creativity exclusively as an outcome of individual behavior to viewing creative work much more broadly, recognizing an expanded conceptualization of the creative process and a more inclusive set of actors expending effort on behalf of creative pursuits, while also considering a greater array of behaviors these actors might use. Rather than replacing foundational research on creativity as an outcome, this perspective offers a broader umbrella, continuing to value research that focuses on creative outcomes while also embracing new questions.

As this collection of articles demonstrates, organizational scholars are at an exciting moment in the study of creativity. The field seems to have avoided the “single-mindedness” that George (2007) feared. Researchers are increasingly shedding new light on the myriad complexities of creativity, using a varied methodological toolkit and capturing creativity “in the wild.” But there are also dangers with this rapid expansion in knowledge. Even as a team of experienced creativity researchers curating this collection, we struggled to organize the emerging strands of research on creativity in a coherent way. We believe that the broad concept of “creative work,” as defined

by Rouse and Harrison and used here, helps achieve the coherence we sought. Indeed, we believe that the notion of creative work can serve as a useful umbrella concept for both illuminating creativity itself and inclusively describing the profound evolution of theoretical and methodological approaches to researching creativity in our field.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A shift to a focus on creative work carries with it almost immediate implications for practice. Earlier research on individual antecedents to creative outcomes implied that personnel selection and motivation are key managerial levers for enhancing creativity. In contrast, because the concept of creative work offers wider theoretical guardrails that include a broader array of experiences, scholarship on creative work encourages attention to context, the quality of interactions between people engaged directly and indirectly in creative projects, and learning across multiple loops of creative effort. As a result, opportunities for creativity-enhancing behavioral interventions and training, modifications to organizational design or, more locally, peer-to-peer interaction, and learning supports abound. For example, consider the study of *Dr. Who* by Soda and colleagues (2021): their findings have direct implications for job rotation on creative teams and imply a need to better understand how to onboard new team members to best spur creativity from the existing team. Similarly, Fisher and colleagues’ (2018) study of “deep help” suggests specific behaviors that can guide organizational leaders seeking to directly assist creative workers.

By focusing on creative work, and asserting that anyone engaged in an effort toward creativity is doing a form of creative work, we also implicitly broaden the groups of individuals that scholars and managers might consider creative. Hence, when thinking about how to build creative capabilities within organizations, researchers and practitioners can spread a wider net beyond “creative individuals” in a few areas, such as R&D, marketing, and strategy leadership, to include everyone employed by or associated with a firm. The history of creativity in the arts, in the sciences, and in organizations is littered with anecdotes about serendipitous encounters that encouraged—or undermined—the effort involved in creative work. Seeing a wider scope of individuals as engaging in aspects of creative work brings these interactions out from the conceptual

shadows, changing creativity from an individual concern to an organizational opportunity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

The turn toward creative work opens up the study of creativity in exciting ways. We focus on four key areas: (1) including more diverse samples and work roles, (2) theorizing and studying new time horizons, (3) understanding the weathering of success and failure, and (4) embracing methodological and theoretical plurality.

Including More Diverse Samples and Work Roles

First, the concept of creative work expands our notions of who is involved in the creative process, including additional activities and peripheral interactions outside of a core project team. Researchers have both the challenge and the opportunity to expand the aspects of creative work, and the individuals involved in creative work, that they study. A focus on creative work will push creativity researchers to recognize creativity in what have traditionally been considered more peripheral areas of the organization—shifting focus, for example, from top management teams making strategy to salespersons, customer service representatives, manufacturing associates, finance professionals, food service workers, custodians, and other staff who carry out the firm's strategy and support the functioning of the organization. This includes getting more diverse samples of individuals and groups doing tasks that have previously been obscured or ignored. Inevitably, this broadening will include attention to blue-collar roles where some work is sadly rendered invisible or often ignored.

In addition, focusing on creative work suggests attention to the permeable nature of boundaries between individuals within an organizational group and those outside the group, as well as between the organization and its environment of customers and other stakeholders. As a result, there is a need to understand how creative work crosses boundaries—for example, how creative work outside of an organization or group might influence creative work inside an organization or group. Research on user innovation provides a provocative example of creative work happening outside of an organization that influences the subsequent work that happens inside the organization (von Hippel, 2005). Recent ethnographic research at NASA (Lifshitz-Assaf, 2018) offers an intriguing template of how scholarly consideration of creative work can promote a more

inclusive perspective on who can be creative. That research documented how external creative work coming from amateur scientists who offer ideas can shift the nature of creative work for those inside the organization by forcing them to reconceive their work identities as scientists. This research opens wide the possibilities for creativity scholars' empirical investigations to arenas such as individuals providing product feedback on internet platforms, fan fiction that extends another author's universe of characters, and collective audience action that encourages Hollywood studios to suspend a project, re-do film, or extend a television series; all offer avenues to further our understanding of creative work. Significantly, expanding empirical studies in this way would involve finding extreme samples that make new forms of creative work more transparent and analyzable (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

Theorizing and Studying New Time Horizons

Taking the notion of creative work seriously extends our understanding of the creative process temporally. A creativity-as-outcome perspective can become myopic because some creative outcomes are simply less visible than others, due to very long or very short time horizons; some creative efforts can take years to bear fruit, while breakthrough moments can occur in brief hallway chats. Moments when individuals engage in creative work likely leave traces that are visible in various ways over time. For example, rather than examining the idea that is ultimately implemented by a group as the primary focus of a study, we might examine the moment-by-moment efforts that allow the group to move past conflict or confusion; this would enable an understanding of the facilitation skills that help groups navigate the creative process. Perhaps more provocatively, we suggest that researchers take on studies that examine creative work over longer time horizons (years, decades, even centuries) to capture creative outputs that serve as inputs for the next phase of creative work (Hargadon, 2021). Notably, studying creative work encourages more attention to and explicit discussions of theorizing about time and temporality. For example, it raises the question of when creative work might rely on a logic of work cycles (Mitchell & James, 2001) versus another work-related rhythm (Albert & Bell, 2002).

Understanding the Weathering of Success and Failure

Because creative work, by definition, includes the notion of effort expended and attempts that might

fail, future research can push theory by examining the effort that comes after successful or unsuccessful outcomes of creative work. For example, what new forms of creative work emerge after fairly rapid, potentially viral success versus steady progress versus repeated failure (Berg, 2022)? How do those who achieve rapid success manage the pressure of a large audience and the felt need to continue to produce work as compared to those who are struggling to find an audience or feel like they have produced a great deal of work without anyone willing to recognize it? The same is true of collaborations: What efforts do members of creative groups engage in, after a project ends, concerning identity (“Who can we be as a group, if this is what we produce?”), interpretation (“What did this project mean for us?”), relational connections (“Which relationships from this collaboration do we preserve, and how?”), or projections (“What future ideas do we have now, based on this collaboration?”)? In these cases, there is likely a tremendous amount of effort expended in sensemaking and generating meaning out of what has happened in the past and determining whether and how to carry the meaning from one creative effort forward into future work. Put simply, studying creative work encourages researchers to examine creativity as an independent variable and to then ask the question: “What happens next?” Combined with our earlier suggestion about extending time horizons, examining success and failure encourages researchers to examine creativity as a practice that produces skills and mindsets beyond the production of new ideas. For example, in contrast to narrowly focusing on whether persistence on a single task produces a one-time creative outcome, we might begin to investigate whether, and under what conditions, successful versus unsuccessful creative work produces persistence over time, across projects (Fetzer, 2021).

Embracing Methodological and Theoretical Plurality

Our collection of articles invites methodological plurality and methodological innovation into the study of creativity. This provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on accepted norms of what is a legitimate method with which to study creativity. Perhaps the most existentially striking challenge for the field of creativity would be a reversion to what has been safe or deemed “legitimate” methodologically from prior eras of creativity research. As our collection implies, studying creative work will require accepting multiple theoretical and methodological

toolkits. The articles we have reviewed used a wide variety of methods, including experiments, surveys, archival data analysis, and ethnographic methods. A more diverse and inclusive science of creativity that expands the deductive, inductive, and abductive pipelines of studies of creative work is needed. For example, as Rouse and Pratt (2021: 310) wrote:

We believe that broadening our methodological approach to creativity in this way [embracing qualitative methods] can and will open up the opportunity to explore new questions and potentially provide pathways toward more creative creativity theory. For example, capturing creative work process, investigating inner work life, and contextualizing observations might involve an expanded set of methods including field video methods, narrative interviews, and participant observation.

Quantitative methodologies bear similar potential to reveal new insights. New advances in experience sampling methodologies provide ways to build on daily experiences of creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005) and to explore how creative work unfolds over time (Fisher et al., 2018). Recent research has also devised new methods for differentiating the facets of creativity, showing that novelty and usefulness can be catalyzed in different ways (Berg, 2014; Lu, Akinola, & Mason, 2017). New analytic techniques allow researchers to disentangle effects among organizations, units, teams, individuals, ideas within individuals, and ideas over time (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). And, machine learning and artificial intelligence offer not only the potential to be drivers of creativity (Amabile, 2019), but also to induce the attributes of creative products in new ways.

As our implications for practice hinted at above, the turn toward creative work also suggests an urgent opportunity for field interventions, research and practitioner partnerships, and action research aimed at rigorously and measurably improving creative work in organizations. At a grassroots level, this suggests a need for more conferences that bring academics and practitioners together, more joint projects and sharing of data, and more coaching of creativity as practiced and measured in industry. While creativity scholars have battled and won legitimacy for methods and definitions within the Academy, perhaps the holy grail of legitimacy is an ability to profoundly and demonstrably affect practice. We hope we have reached a point now where academics’ methodological and theoretical toolkits can provide a foundation for intervening and improving creative work.

In concert with our arguments about methodological plurality, we argue that research on creativity should also increasingly embrace theoretical plurality. The concept of creative work pushes the boundaries of our phenomenon of interest into new intersections with other subfields of organizational studies. The papers curated here demonstrate intersections with research on innovation, help seeking and giving, feedback, entrepreneurship, and networks, among others. Widening our focus to include all aspects of creative work suggests an increasing need to see creativity research as a science of theoretical intersections. To be clear, we are not suggesting theoretical splintering for the sake of newness. The function of plurality is to integrate and synthesize multiple, parallel conversations currently siloed by theory and method—or, at least, to allow the various conversants to better listen to and learn from one another. The goal should be a cumulative, and growing, knowledge base on creative work. Indeed, the whole point of introducing the construct of creative work is to create an umbrella under which these knowledge-building conversations can take place. Hence, efforts at theoretical consolidation will also be required.

CONCLUSION

Shifting to a focus on creative work represents an exciting turn for the creativity literature. Under the umbrella of creative work, the papers curated here emphasize an inclusive approach to creativity, an approach focused on the diverse efforts of a wide array of actors. As future researchers embrace this turn, we will uncover not only more promising avenues for promoting creativity, but also more creative ways of seeing creativity itself. Because creative work is a practical phenomenon that has the promise of benefiting the individuals, organizations, and societies that invest in it, the goal is not simply to improve organizations' profits. In the face of the wicked problems the world faces—the climate crisis, resource and financial inequity, and racism, to name a few—the goal is, more importantly, to provide the theoretical structure and empirical basis for solving those problems with organized, collective, and creative work.

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