New and Useless: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Organizational Creativity

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to advance research on creativity in organizations by developing a psychoanalytic perspective from which creativity may be understood as an imaginary construction of the self. This self aims at producing the new and useful yet fails to do so. The useful is only marginally so and many of the interactions designed to ensure usefulness result in socially useless activities. The paper suggests, however, that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the failure of the imaginary is also useful. It is useful to the creative person as subject of the unconscious providing opportunities for struggles with otherness and alienation. Such struggles allow subjects to experience their creative potential and produce something beyond organizational kitsch. The implications for the theory and practice of organizational creativity are discussed.

Key Words: Organizational Creativity, Creative Self-Image, Subjectivity, Psychoanalysis, Lacan, Usefulness
**Introduction**

Recently, Hjorth (2005) suggested that entrepreneurship has been dominated by economic discourses that marginalize artistic expression and creativity. He proposes that entrepreneurship and organizing are always already playful and creative and that resistance to dominant managerialist discourses should begin by uncovering this. Here resistance is positioned as the unveiling and widening of playful and creative spaces in organizations. To illustrate this the author draws on a project in which artists were called in to help employees transform work. Specifically, a space was created in which the discourse of Art was liberated to become everyday artistic expression, literally a space in which employees could find “comfort, rest, silence, and pleasure on the premises of [the organization]” (Hjorth, 2005: 394).

Via the creation of this physical space and the introduction of a daily, hourly radio broadcast by the employees for the employees, the author suggests, the employees were able to subvert strictly performative discourses of creativity concerned with the production of maximum output (Fournier and Grey, 2000) and re-appropriate them for their own ends. However, the creative space was also “transferred into work so as to change the way work is organized” (Hjorth, 2005: 394). Therefore, while the introduction of a creative space may have been used for purposes other than those intended by the organization, it seems that it was also used in ways that furthered performative concerns and supported rational, economic definitions of organizing.

There may be insightful parallels to be drawn between creativity and learning in organizations. Like learning, creativity has been advanced as a crucial capability for the long-term viability of organizations (Unsworth, 2001) and “a core competency for
employees...in most contemporary organizations" (Choi, 2004). Like learning in organizations, creativity may be dismissed as a management fad or examined more closely as to the truth effects it produces (Contu, Grey and Oertenblad, 2003). Particularly, similar to learning discourses through which employees are encouraged to question everything except the fact that learning has to be performative (Contu et al., 2003), creativity discourses stress that all assumptions can and should be questioned except the assumption that creativity must be performative.

In much of the prior body of research, which has been described as the functionalist-reductionist approach to creativity (Drazin, Glynn and Kazanijan, 1999), it has long been recognized that creativity is performative. Indeed, the most commonly accepted definition of creativity as the production of novel and useful ideas and solutions (Amabile, 1988; Amabile, Conti, Coon and Lazenby, 1996; Ford, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin, 1993) illustrates that research on creativity is typically focused on increasing organizational creative output and not on describing the complexities of the creative process (Drazin et al., 1999). Presumably, it is even less focused on encouraging such a process irrespective of, or perhaps in opposition to, intended organizational outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is to explore further the complexities of the creative process particularly with regard to performative outcomes and what may be considered useful in organizations. To accomplish this I examine creativity as a discourse. That is, I explore how subjects position themselves (Davies and Harre, 1990) in interactions with others by drawing on different discourses of creativity, which are defined as “a more or less integrated, prefabricated line of using language and reasoning in which the
phenomenon [here creativity] is constructed rather than revealed or mirrored”
(Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Importantly, I draw on psychoanalytic theorizing to
examine how discourses of creativity produce and are produced by the conscious as well
as unconscious construction of subjectivity.

From Freud to Jung, creativity has long been studied from a psychoanalytic
perspective (Busse and Mansfield, 1980). But this research has focused mainly on how
idea generation is facilitated through preconscious, drive-related impulses by, for
example, allowing daydreams and fantasies to inform conscious thinking (Kris, 1952). In
particular, it has focused on how the unconscious may be explored as a well-spring of
creative thought (Kubie, 1958) by facilitating regression to more primitive, subconscious
cognitive modes (Koestler, 1964) as a way to enhance the production and selection of
creative ideas (Hadamard, 1945).

In this paper I draw on the psychoanalytic theorizing of Jacques Lacan (1968;
1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001). I selected a Lacanian framework because its focus on the
construction of subjectivity in discourse fits well with the aims of this paper and also
because it has been shown as increasingly relevant for understanding organizations today
(e.g. Arnaud, 2002; 2003; Driver, 2005; 2006; Roberts, 2005; Vanheule, Lievrouw and
Verhaeghe, 2003). Here a Lacanian approach allows me to explore how creativity
discourse is implicated in imaginary constructions of the self and the creative struggles
that result from their failures. It also enables me to examine creativity in relation to its
usefulness for the creative person as a subject and thereby to introduce a new and
alternative perspective on the performativity of organizational creativity. The two aspects
I will focus on in particular are how what is commonly considered as producing the new
and useful in organizations may be useless and how what may be considered useless is rather useful for the subject and perhaps the organization. Specifically, failures of and struggles with imaginary constructions of the creative self may be useful as less alienated and more creative experiences of subjectivity and the production of the new beyond organizational kitsch, or that, which necessarily suppresses the unusual, troublesome, difficult, paradoxical, critical and questioning (Linstead, 2002).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I review functionalist-reductionist research on creativity (Drazin et al., 1999) and provide a brief overview of key psychoanalytic concepts. Then I examine creativity in the context of imaginary constructions of the self and their failures and use this to develop alternate conceptions of usefulness. I conclude by discussing implications for the theory and practice of organizational creativity.

The Functionalist-Reductionist Approach to Creativity

Creativity in organizations is almost universally defined as an individual-level phenomenon that is a necessary, if not sufficient, input to the organizational-level phenomenon of innovation (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). Specifically, creativity has been defined as an individual’s or group’s production of novel and useful ideas that subsequently may be implemented as organizational innovations (Amabile et al., 1996). As a result, most research has focused on creativity as an outcome assessed in retrospective analysis and on the contextual variables by which creativity may be manipulated and improved (Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjin, 2000). Little research has focused on creativity as a process (Unsworth, 2001) that individuals engage in with the object of being creative that nonetheless fails to produce creative results (Drazin et al., 2000).
While some have argued that creativity is “an ambiguous public assessment subject to conflict, influence, and negotiation” (Ford, 2000: 284) and have allowed that the determination of what is considered to be creative is a political process in which the dominant group gets to decide what is or is not creative at the time (Drazin et al., 1999), usefulness has not been examined in a similar manner. Specifically, it has not been examined as a contested and contestable discourse in which the assumption can be questioned that the creative must be useful in terms of organizational goals, such as innovation and economic gain (Amabile et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993).

Therefore, the hallmark of functionalist-reductionist approaches is not only their emphasis on creativity as an outcome versus a process, but also, and importantly, their lack of exploration of the concept of usefulness as “an ambiguous public assessment subject to conflict, influence, and negotiation” (Ford, 2000: 284). Specifically, usefulness is treated as an unambiguous concept that defines as useful everything that supports organizational goals, hence defines it in a performative fashion, while other ways of being useful are not discussed. Why this may be problematic will become clearer when we examine how individuals construct subjectivity in discourse.

**Key Psychoanalytic Concepts**

To examine creativity, especially in light of less conscious aspects of subjectivity, I now review briefly some key concepts of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theorizing. I draw on Lacan’s writings (1968; 1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001) but also on recent exposes of his theories in the context of organizational studies (Arnaud, 2002; 2003; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Driver, 2005; 2006; in press; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Vanheule et al., 2003).
Lacan suggested that the exploration of language and discourse is critical to understanding how individuals conceive of themselves as subjects. He also proposed that when individuals speak about themselves consciously, they present a self through discourse that is typically an imaginary construction. That is, when we speak, we commonly portray the self as a stable and knowable object. We present ourselves as if we know or can know the answers to the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want?” Unfortunately, from a psychoanalytic perspective, such knowledge is impossible because all discourse by which we might know and present the self is bounded by the structural limitations of language or the symbolic order. The symbolic order includes the desires and constructions of internalized others such as parents or institutions and the conventions of language handed down through generations of others. When we use language, therefore, we can only express who we are in the words of others. The self so constructed is only a distorted image of the self as mis-represented and alienated in a symbolic order that is of an other or otherness.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the best we can hope for is that we become aware of this misrepresentation and thereby less frustrated by the impossibility of maintaining our illusions. In particular, we can come to find some enjoyment, or jouissance, in simply experiencing how creative we are, as subjects of the unconscious, in disrupting our imaginary constructions and thereby assert that we are more than those constructions. For example, a screenwriter might describe herself with a long list of attributes affirming that she is a creative person and describe exactly what she wants in terms of a creative script for a TV series. But in the meeting with the Hollywood
producer her imaginary self-construction is disrupted by her very efforts to convey this
and the producer might respond as follows:

I mean someone who works too hard and gets all dressed up – I don’t like that. I
feel you’re working too hard, you’re too needy…I mean there’s a couple of
female writers I’ve met that wear these sort of fancy hats when they pitch, and I
know that you can’t go home and dress like that when you’re on the computer.
That’s not what real writers do. (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003: 293)

It is exactly such a failed encounter that gives us a chance to realize how our uniqueness
and creativity come out not in the answers we find but in how we fail to do so. It is
something in us, the subject of the unconscious, which drives us somehow to wear a hat
as an expression of creativity. And it is the hat that marks the writer uniquely as a
creative subject precisely because it fails to convey who she thinks she is and therefore to
obtain what she thinks she wants.

In short, a Lacanian perspective invites us to focus on the fault lines in our
discourse with its irreconcilable conflicts, omissions, ambiguities and tensions (Fink,
2004) as failed imaginary representations of the self. It invites us to notice and enjoy their
creative construction not so we can understand what is underneath. Underneath is only
lack. The interesting, creative and unique part is always the encounter with this lack and
the experience of the failure to cover it up.

Creativity as Imaginary Construction of the Self

At this point, I would like to show the implications of a Lacanian perspective and
develop the idea that the discourse of creativity in organizational contexts facilitates
imaginary constructions of the creative subject. It does so because it encourages the
construction of a stable, definable self by way of answering questions as to who the
creative person is or should be and what the creative person wants or should want and facilitating a discourse of the self as internalized others and otherness.

I begin with how creativity discourse facilitates answering the question of who the creative person is. The psychological make-up of creative people (Ford, 1996) has long been studied as an important variable of organizational creativity (Woodman et al., 1993). Specifically, a number of personality traits have been identified that define who the creative person is. For example, a creative person is someone who exhibits persistence, curiosity, self-motivation, cognitive ability, risk orientation and general intelligence (Amabile, 1988). Importantly, the creative person is someone who identifies him/herself as a creative person (Farmer, Tierney and Kung-McIntyre, 2003) and possesses, what has been labeled, a creative self-image (Farmer et al., 2003; Ford, 1996; Mumford and Gustafson, 1988).

This creative self-image does not only describe who the creative person is or should be but importantly informs what this person should want. In particular, it is closely tied to another important variable of organizational creativity, namely the intrinsic motivation of creative persons (Amabile et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Madjar, Oldham and Pratt, 2002; Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Shin and Zhou, 2003; Woodman et al., 1993). Intrinsic motivation is defined as a self-regulatory mechanism whereby attention is directed toward a creative task whose solution or advancement is experienced as positive regardless of external rewards (Woodman et al., 1993). Intrinsic motivation is maintained by keeping the investment of the person’s identity in the task itself high (Tierney and Farmer, 2002). Put differently, the creative person has a creative self-image that should make him or her want to be creative and enjoy creativity for its own sake.
To summarize, the discourse of organizational creativity facilitates imaginary constructions of the self by providing answers relative to who the creative person is, for example someone who has a creative self-image, and what this person wants, for example to enjoy creative tasks. As I have shown above these are imaginary constructions because they do not reflect the subject (of the unconscious) but constitute mis-representations built on internalized others or otherness. This last point comes to light when we examine how the creative-self image is constructed in organizational creativity discourse.

For example, while research has found that a creative self-image is an important antecedent of organizational creativity, it has also been found that the expectations of others about and reactions to the creative person are equally important (Ford, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). That is, it is not just important that the creative person believes that he or she is creative but that a series of others also believe this and respond in ways that signal this belief. These others include supervisors (Oldham and Cummings, 1996), one’s workgroup (Amabile et al., 1996), and other stakeholders of the organization (Ford, 1996). In this sense, organizational creativity discourse does not just encourage others, such as supervisors and coworkers to expand effort to affirm that the creative person is and can be creative (Madjar et al., 2002) but also facilitates the internalization of others as part of the creative self-image.

Therefore, creativity discourse is not just or, perhaps, not at all, about what the person develops as a creative self-image or what they might want in terms of engagements with creative tasks but rather about what the person has internalized about what others believe about being creative. For example, prior research has stressed that it is internalized others whose evaluation is considered and anticipated when the creative
person decides what is novel and useful even before creative ideas are shared with coworkers (Amabile et al., 1990). This internalization is fostered particularly in functionalist-reductionist conceptions of organizational creativity stressing that creativity is not only the production of the new and useful (Amabile, 1988) but, importantly, that something is only creative to the extent that observers or others agree that it is novel and useful (Farmer et al., 2003; Taggar, 2002). Particularly the latter idea, that creativity and whether something is new and useful is an assessment made by others rather than by the creative person, is crucial for demonstrating that creativity discourse facilitates imaginary self-constructions as a reflection of internalized otherness. The same idea is also crucial for exploring how such imaginary constructions routinely fail.

**Creativity as a Failed Imaginary Construction of the Self**

Having examined how organizational creativity discourse facilitates imaginary constructions of the self by defining the creative person, what the creative person wants and encouraging the creative self-image as a representation of otherness, I now explore how organizational creativity discourse facilitates the failure of such constructions. In particular, I would like to argue that the pivot point, around which failure in this discourse turns, is the notion of usefulness and the irresolvable contradictions of organizational creativity discourse that this introduces, especially relative to the intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation of the creative self.

Prior research suggests that intrinsic motivation is considered crucial for an engagement in creative behavior and must be protected from infringements by external rewards and evaluations that might make the individual extrinsically motivated and hence less creative (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996). It also suggests that creativity must
be externally validated as being useful to the organization (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). So on the one hand, creative persons must be creative for its own sake but on the other hand they are only considered creative as long as they produce outcomes that are useful or have instrumental value to others. Put differently, while the creative self-image is to be constructed around who the creative person is and what he/she wants, it can only be validated by others and necessarily rests on what others believe and want.

The result is the contradictory need to foster creativity through both autonomy and encouragement (Amabile et al., 1996). Autonomy reinforces creativity as a self-regulatory process. Encouragement from others confirms the creative identity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is not clear how the imaginary construction of the self as creative person, who knows who they are and what they want, can be maintained in the face of its apparent failure as a mis-representation of otherness. Prior research seems to straddle this fault line by acknowledging that creative performance is highly susceptible to social influence and that imagined others have an effect as expected evaluators of creative behavior (Amabile, Goldfarb and Brackfield, 1990). Therefore, it is crucial that others’ evaluations of an individual’s creativity are informational rather than judgmental, meaning that they must serve to inform the creative person that they are being perceived as creative more than rewarding or punishing the person for what they produce (Amabile et al., 1990; Shalley, 1995).

In other words, there can and should be feedback from others, but this feedback should support intrinsic motivation and validate that the person is or can be creative on their own (Madjar et al., 2002; Tierney and Farmer, 2002) rather than by pleasing
organizational stakeholders (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003; Ford, 1996) and simply complying with what the organization considers to be useful and rewards as creative (Amabile et al., 1996). In short, the failure of imaginary constructions of the creative self becomes evident as the creative self-image is constructed around a seemingly clear understanding of who the creative person is and what he/she wants which is driven and must be validated by what others think without being able to acknowledge that this is so, as this would shift intrinsic motivation to extrinsic motivation and hence fewer creative outcomes (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996).

Of course, we could now argue that this is simply a case of political maneuvering whereby the organization takes control of the person’s creative self-image and intentionally supports that individuals internalize what others want. This insight is congruent with prior research indicating that control in post-bureaucratic organizations is exercised through identity work, specifically by harnessing individuals’ needs for a stable and acceptable sense of self (Willmott, 1997). From this perspective creativity discourse is perhaps just another means with which to colonize the individual by instilling ways of self-regulation that are seen as desirable for maintaining the person’s identity, which are at the same time conducive to organizational goal attainment (Willmott, 1997).

While this argument provides valuable insights into the dynamics of organizational creativity in organizations today, it does not, from a psychoanalytic perspective, fully address their complexities. In particular, it reduces the failure of the imaginary to a political maneuver imposed on the individual by the organization. Yet, the failure of the imaginary is a structural condition that is experienced by all individuals regardless of their particular (organizational) context (Lacan, 1988b). What I am
suggesting therefore is that the failure of imaginary creativity discourse may be
manifested around political moves and the performative approach to creativity in
organizations, but it is not, or not just, driven by them.

Indeed, the failures of imaginary creativity discourse manifest themselves as
much by the individual’s desire to produce the new and useful, and hence to be creative
in a performative fashion, as by their lack of actually producing the new and useful, and
hence the subversion of performative creativity. First, creativity often fails to produce the
new as creativity ranges from incremental to radical and many adults tend to produce
only marginally creative results (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988) preferring conformity to
creativity, which risks being unacceptable to others (Sternberg, 2003). Second, creativity
does not seem to be as useful as it first appears for the end it is to serve, namely
organizational innovation (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996; King, 1995), as
organizations tend to engage in routine adaptation but rarely experiment with the truly
novel (March, 1995). Therefore, as a necessary condition for organizational innovation
and long-term viability (Amabile, 1988), creative behavior on the part of individuals does
not seem to be very useful or rather its use is limited to incremental innovation.

The point is that as soon as creativity unfolds as a contested and contestable
discourse in organizations (Drazin et al., 1999), usefulness becomes an important point of
failure for imaginary constructions of the creative self. The validation of the creative self-
image is always threatened by the need to produce something useful while the need to
validate the imaginary threatens the usefulness of creative behavior. The creative
outcome, like a sublime object (Zizek, 1989), is always elusive or, when attained,
immediately turns to what was not desired, here the incremental, the marginally creative
(Mumford and Gustafson, 1988). Importantly, therefore, the more imaginary constructions of the creative person are built around the aim to produce the useful, the more they fail producing the useless.

This dynamic is revealed in theories and practices of creativity that seem to place great value on the creative person, as a cornerstone of organizational innovation and viability, whose self-image must be propped up carefully and continuously, yet are concerned almost exclusively with the many contextual variables that can be manipulated to enhance organizational goal attainment (Drazin et al., 2000). Here the individual is not only not the focus of attention (Unsworth, 1999), but also, importantly, the failure of imaginary constructions of the creative self manifests itself as a radically externalized view of creativity. In this view creativity is not about the creative self but rather happens entirely outside of the creative person.

Therefore, the failure of the imaginary may come into focus precisely at the interstice of discourses emphasizing the creative self-image and its intrinsic motivations, social support as a way to enhance the production of the useful (Amabile et al., 1990; Madjar et al., 2002; Perry-Smith, 2006; Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Shalley, 1995) and creativity as an endless series of interactions whose sole purpose it is to create images of creativity between creators and those who are evaluating them (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003). Specifically, failures of the imaginary may be played out at the interstice of the following narratives (this one from a creative person describing intrinsic motivation):

I let my thinking play only on what it would be like to be doing the work. Whether I’d become famous doing it, whether I’d earn a lot of money, wouldn’t be considerations…Doing it only for its own sake…Did I know when I had done it well, done it just as I wanted to do it…regardless of what anyone else said? Did
I know myself to be a master in it? (Koller, 1990:148 quoted in Mainemelis, 2001: 558)

And narratives like this (about what it is like to convince others that one can deliver something new and useful):

You want to stimulate them, you want to get their curiosity going... You know, I'm just swinging you around the room, but you'll say now that's creative. And you'll interpret that as creativity, and it could be very creative... That's what you want to happen. (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003: 296)

And narratives like this (about what those who are being convinced consider effective):

You're rarely selling the idea. You are selling you. (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003: 293)

We can see here how struggles with imaginary creative self-images are played out in the contradictory space of knowing oneself as a creative person, knowing when one is creative and being a "master in it" (Mainemelis, 2001: 558) versus producing or being produced by interactions that legitimate this knowledge and validate the creative self-image that must, in turn, produce the useful and therefore be sold. We can also see how the self that is so sold is elusive and how it is produced precariously as interpretations that "you want to happen" (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003: 293) but that might not happen. Therefore, we see how creativity discourse fosters failed imaginary constructions and, importantly, how it confronts the creative self with the experience of lack.

Creativity and the Useless

Up to this point, I have explored organizational creativity as an imaginary construction of the self. I have argued that because creativity in organizations must not just produce the novel but also the useful, it produces much that is useless. I now examine
how this act of producing the socially useless may allow us to rethink the concept of usefulness. Bataille (1988) argued that human beings are most human and most creative when they engage in socially useless activities. A psychoanalytic perspective suggests that individuals are most powerful and creative when they disrupt imaginary constructions of the self and experience subjectivity as lack or that, which is missing from conscious discourse (Lacan, 1988b). A synthesis of these insights suggests that the socially useless activities engaged in to validate imaginary constructions of the creative self provide opportunities to be powerful and creative in the act of struggling with their inevitable failure. They may give us a chance to notice the failures that mark our discourse, inspect them closely and enjoy their uniqueness and creativity.

So if we take the narratives I have cited above in which the creative self-image fails to be constructed coherently at the interstice of contradictory discourses of the creative person and we allow them to become a conversation about lack, we can see how the socially useless task of selling the self to make an other say “now that’s creative” (Elshbach and Kramer, 2003: 296) may be quite useful as an experience of one’s creative potential (Lacan, 1988b). Specifically, I am arguing that what is useful about organizational creativity is precisely that we have to conceptualize it in the context of social interactions (Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer, 1995) and, importantly, that this offers new opportunities for subjects to experience and interact differently. Especially, if we consider social creativity, or creativity with respect to the many social acts required to move new ideas through organizations (Frost, 1995) and to convince others and being convinced that something is new as well as useful (Elshbach and Kramer, 2003), we can see how failures of the imaginary may be rendered transparent and potentially worked
through as a creative struggle with identity and desire if, that is, a discursive space is provided for doing so.

This space may be rather limited at present. For example, prior research has suggested that creativity in organizations is marked by the experience of rejection (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller and Staw, 2005), alienation (Simonton, 1995) and struggle (Weick, 1995). Specifically, interactions with others are marked by the experience that one’s ideas are often ignored or rejected (Amabile et al., 2005), that others find one’s ideas strange or troublesome (Simonton, 1995) and that creativity is a constant struggle with errors and mistakes (Weick, 1995). To the extent that rejection, alienation and struggle remain unnoticed or undiscussable and therefore excluded from the discourse of the positive, the encouraging and the supportive (Amabile et al., 1996), there is little or no discursive space for working through them as failures of the imaginary, which, in turn, likely produces only the marginally useful for subjects and organizations.

The conclusions drawn from a recent study on organizational creativity may support this insight. It suggests that while positive organizational contexts for creativity may result in increased employee morale, they seem to have little or no effect on employee creativity (Choi, 2004). While the author concludes that this points to the importance of individual traits relative to environmental factors in determining creative outcomes, the framework developed here suggests that positive contexts prevent an effective engagement with the failure of the imaginary creative self. They do so not because they offer imaginary constructions of the creative self that are better or less likely to fail, but because they make it more difficult to openly acknowledge and reflect on the failure of such constructions.
This suggests that the more the management of creativity is focused on the successful manipulation of organizational variables (Drazin et al., 1999), the more it becomes difficult to acknowledge rejection, alienation and struggle as this would imply the failure of the effective, if imaginary, management of creativity. It is from this perspective that it becomes clearer why the production of organizational kitsch, as that which covers up the troublesome and the questioning, is so common (Linstead, 2002).

The construction of imaginary creative selves and contexts in which such constructions are supported reinforce each other. They do so because they are built on the assumption that the failure of the imaginary can be corrected or compensated for in some way. They do so because in the imaginary order individuals believe that if their creative self-image fails, then this can be overcome by simply replacing one imaginary construction with another. Or, returning to the example I used earlier, if the hat worn in the Hollywood pitch meeting (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003) failed to convince the producer that the screenwriter is creative, then the writer simply wore the wrong hat or did something else that can be corrected next time.

The perspective developed here suggests however that the failure of the imaginary cannot be corrected and that it is not a question of finding the correct way of being or selling a creative self but of stopping to notice our failed attempts at doing so and experiencing them as powerful markers of who we are. Evidence that it may be possible to make discursive space for this in organizations seems to be provided by recent research. It has found that individuals who are less satisfied with their jobs and experience negative or ambivalent emotional states are more creative (Fong, 2006; George and Zhou, 2002; Zhou and George, 2001). It has also found that employees who
have more distant social relationships with coworkers are more creative (Perry-Smith, 2006; Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003). The framework developed here suggests that employees who may be described as dissatisfied, ambivalent, negative or distant are less likely to validate creative self-images by drawing on the organization’s creativity discourse or they experience their failure more often and/or reflect on this failure more. Importantly, perhaps they are given more space to do so in their social interactions. Maybe others are more ready to accept that the discourses of empowerment, support, discretion and nurturing organizational cultures commonly adopted to maximize creative output (Ford, 1995) will be more contested and contestable in interactions with individuals who are less satisfied with their jobs, have weaker social ties and are more ambivalent or negative emotionally. Therefore, it is not that interactions are less imaginary for individuals described as dissatisfied, distant or ambivalent, but that there is more space for them to encounter and reflect on the failures of the imaginary. This in turn may provide a space for radical rather than marginal creativity (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988) in which something new can be created that does not (even symbolically) resolve the contradictions that mark the subject and mass society today (Frank, 1997) and is therefore useless as organizational kitsch (Linstead, 2002).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to contribute to research on organizational creativity. Specifically, the paper developed a psychoanalytic perspective to examine creativity as an imaginary construction of the self. This in turn provided a framework with which to rethink the concept of usefulness. From a functionalist-reductionist perspective, in which creativity is defined as the production of the new and useful,
usefulness points to a performative assumption. The goal is to manipulate contextual variables in order to maximize creative output (Drazin et al., 1999; 2000). However, based on the framework developed in this paper, it becomes evident that the performative nature of creativity is always already contested and contestable. The useful always also creates the useless. The imaginary construction of the creative self requires socially useless activities to validate it. If it is validated successfully, its usefulness is limited to the production of the marginally creative. If it is not validated successfully, and space is provided for an engagement with its failure, the socially useless interactions designed to enhance the creative self-image may serve a useful purpose for the creative subject as well as the organization. It may be particularly useful as creative struggles, which cannot be subsumed by kitsch and the preemptive rebelliousness that hip consumerism thrives on today (Frank, 1997).

As such, the paper supports but also extends prior research suggesting that we should uncover and make space for organizing that is always already creative and playful (Hjorth, 2005). Based on the framework developed in the paper, this space is not, or not just, a physical space where employees can rest and play (Hjorth, 2005). Rather it is a discursive space in which it is acceptable to talk about and reflect on how we seek to be persons who produce the novel and the useful but fail to do so and how, even when we do produce them, they fail to satisfy us. Future research could explore in greater detail how such spaces may be conceptualized and created.

One particularly promising avenue for such inquiry seems to be the study of interactions between creative persons and others who are to assess their creativity. Prior research has focused on criteria used to assess whether an individual has creative
potential and on the assessors rather than the person being assessed (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003). Future research could focus instead on the person being assessed and experiences made by this person in the process. Specifically, it could explore how interactions are experienced by the creative person as validating the imaginary creative self but also how they fail to do so.

In clinical settings, analysts focus intently on the discourse of the analysand, or the person being analyzed (Lacan, 1988a). Particularly, analysts pay attention to the failures of the analysand’s speech such as tangents, omissions, denials, silences, unusual constructions, slips of the tongue and other errors that might indicate disruptions of the imaginary (Fink, 2004). Similarly, discourse analytic methods (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Davies and Harre, 1990; Potter and Whetherell, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) could be used to examine the discourse of interactions between creative persons and a variety of stakeholders that routinely assess creative outcomes in organizations (Ford, 1996). Such discourse could be examined in terms of how the imaginary position of the creative self is constructed and how such constructions are disrupted by specific failures of speech. These in turn might provide insights into how particular subjects struggle with otherness and how creativity and play are manifested in particular discursive formations.

Further insight into such experiences from the perspective of the creative person may be gained by using diary studies. Prior research has made use of such studies to examine the relationship between different emotional states and creative outcomes (Amabile et al., 2005). While this research has focused on analyzing diary entries made by research participants to assess whether they experience positive or negative moods
prior to, during or after the production of creative ideas for a specific task, similar diary entries could be collected and analyzed relative to the construction of creative self-images (Farmer et al., 2003; Ford, 1996; Mumford and Gustafson, 1988). Instead of affect, the focus would be on discourse specific to how the person constructs this image and what events and interactions disrupt it. Particularly in conjunction with the study of interactions between creative persons and those who assess their creativity, as outlined above, such diary studies may provide insights about how individuals use the production of the new and useful as a way to cover up the lack of the subject. Specifically, they may offer insight about how the marginally creative (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988) and organizational kitsch (Linstead, 2002) are experienced as both affirming but also as subverting a person’s creative self-image.

The proposed framework also has a number of practical implications. First, it highlights the importance of resources for creativity. Prior research has found that appropriate resources are a crucial prerequisite for organizational creativity (Amabile, 1988; Amabile et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). The framework developed here suggests however that the relationship between resources and creativity may not be as straightforward as previously thought. Specifically, more resources may not lead to commensurate results in terms of useful creative output. Rather as resources increase, so does the expectation of useful results, which in turn should lead to more socially useless activities as these expectations threaten imaginary self-constructions. An important practical implication is that resources in organizations lead to the production and consumption of excess (Bataille, 1988). This in turn drives home how important such
resources are for subjects. Put simply, organizational resources support the socially useless activities that subjects can use to create and play (Bataille, 1988).

Another practical implication of the framework developed here is that organizational purpose is necessary for the development of creative practices that serve alternative purposes (De Certeau, 1984). The useless is not possible without the useful and vice versa. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the intentional production of the new and useless is as much an imaginary construction of the creative self as the production of the new and useful. However, there may be a number of ways by which the production of the new and useful may be performed. Recently, Case and Pineiro (2006) examined how computer programmers both supported and resisted organizational demands for performativity by narrating programming as an artistic undertaking. Similarly, there may be opportunities to support as well as resist organizational demands for performativity by narrating creativity as the struggle for but also with a creative self-image.

Particularly, by taking seriously the externalized view of creativity as consisting of interactions between creative persons and those who are to assess their creativity (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003), creativity discourse may be performed as conversations in which we play with the absence of the creative subject. In this case, the focus shifts from technical to social creativity (Frost, 1995). It shifts from a private process in which the core-self is invested and the goal is to convince others that this self has produced the new and useful (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003) to an externalized and public process in which the goal is to produce interactions that are new and useful. Prior research has advanced the notion that “it is our social practices that believe in our place” (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 168). Conversely, when we consider what is useful about organizational creativity, from
a psychoanalytic perspective, we may conclude that the failures of the imaginary and the absence of the creative subject rather than its presence make creativity useful. This leads to the interesting insight that it may be the failed interactions we produce in attempting to validate the creative self that are creative in our place; and, importantly, finally say no to the illusion (Zizek, 2006) that there is a private, creative self untouched by the (political) discourses in which we negotiate what is useful and useless in organizations.

References


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