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## COMMENTS AND CORRECTIONS

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# “Big C, Little c” Creativity as a False Dichotomy: Reality is not Categorical

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*Comments and Corrections* appearing in recent issues of the *CRJ* have explored (a) the Big C/little c distinction (Merrotsy, 2013a), (b) tolerance of ambiguity as part of the creative personality (Merrotsy, 2013b), and (c) the nearly-universal definition of creativity that focuses on originality and effectiveness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Each of these has supported the mission of the *CRJ* in several ways. They have each satisfied one of the principal goals of the *CRJ*, for example, which is *integration*. Articles appearing in the *CRJ* are original, useful, and well-integrated into the academic literature (Runco, 1988). The *CRJ* is, after all, a scientific journal, and the sciences progress by building on existing theory and previous empirical findings—that is, via integration.

Merrotsy's (2013a) most recent contribution to *Comments and Corrections* focused on the history and support for the Big C/little c distinction that is so commonly cited in creativity studies. Merrotsy's effort is laudable because, as he demonstrated and concluded, support for the distinction is questionable. Thus, it is a commonly-used distinction without real substance or validation. Merrotsy also identified the most likely origins of the dichotomy. A Big C and little c distinction was used years ago in studies of culture, and apparently it drifted over to studies of creativity.

The Big C/little c distinction may have applied well to studies of culture, but it is unfortunate that creativity studies adopted the same dichotomy. When applied to creativity, the dichotomy is unrealistic and misleading. Instead of advancing knowledge about creativity and offering valid suggestions to educators, managers, and other individuals who wish to fulfill creative potentials, the Big C/little c dichotomy obfuscates. In particular, when the

Big C/little c dichotomy is used, the developmental and functional connections between the two are relegated or even forgotten.

Actually, there are two problems with the Big C/little c distinction. The first is the assumption that any creativity (e.g., Big C creativity) requires fame, reputation, eminence, or high-level achievement. Certainly, creativity often contributes to those things. The problem arises when creativity is equated with any of them. Creativity is easy to distinguish from impact, fame, eminence, reputation, and accomplishment (Runco, 1995). Fame and these other things may sometimes involve creativity, but they also require things that are not inherent in creativity (e.g., persistence, impression management, confidence, luck). These cannot be inherent in creativity because creativity sometimes occurs without them. Persistence, impression management, luck, and so on are, therefore, not requisites for creativity. Additionally, impact, fame, eminence, reputation, and accomplishment are often present when creativity is absent. Not all famous people are creative, nor are all creative people famous. Creativity is, therefore, one thing, and fame, eminence, and reputation are sometimes related to it, and sometimes not.

The second significant problem resulting from the Big C/little c dichotomy is simply the fact that it is a dichotomy. It separates high-level creative performances from everyday, personal, mundane forms of creativity. This is a problem because the processes involved in personal, everyday creativity are the same as those involved in high-level creative achievements. The latter do require various other things that are not required for the former, but those things are not part of the creative process. They are extraneous to it. They sometimes come into play, at least when creativity is expressed in a public fashion, in a well-recognized domain, but they are not part of the creativity in creativity.

Big C creativity may involve things that are lacking in little c creativity (e.g., social recognition), but both start with the individual and his or her original and effective

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idea or insight. After the creative idea is produced, expertise may add to it, persistence may allow a refinement of it, impression management may couch it so it is accepted, and so on, but the creative part of the process (e.g., the construction of an original interpretation of experience) is the same as the creativity of little *c* creativity. So again, Big *C* and little *c* creativity differ in things that are not required for creativity. If their commonality is dismissed, as is implied by a separation into Big *C* and little *c*, efforts to fulfill creative potential will suffer.

“Big *C*/little *c*” is a false dichotomy. It becomes a *false trichotomy* when other categories, such as mini *c* or Pro *C*, are added. Recognizing mini *c* or Pro *c* or additional levels of creativity may seem to be a good idea in the sense that it is a bit more sensitive, just as a scale with a large number of levels (e.g., Likert scale with 9 or 10 levels) more accurately describes reality than a scale with very few levels (e.g., a Likert scale with three levels). Yet the significant problem with the Big *C*/little *c* dichotomy applies to the other categorizations (e.g., Pro *C*) as well. Little *c* creativity is still separated from Big *C* (and Pro *C*, and mini *c*) creativity when, in fact, what research and education should focus on is what they share, instead of separating them. What is needed is an emphasis on continuity and an avoidance of categorization. If emphasis is given to what is common to personal (little *c*) creativity and actual creative achievement, it is more likely that efforts to facilitate the fulfillment of potentials such that little *c* becomes Big *C* or Pro *C* creativity will succeed.

Plucker and Begatto (2010, quoted by Merrotsy, 2013a) were also aware of the problems of the Big *C*/little *c* dichotomy. They are correct that (a) there is no evidence that it exists, and (b) emphasizing Big *C* makes it difficult to do a good job fulfilling the potentials implied by *little c*. The lack of evidence, noted by both Merrotsy (2013a) and Plucker and Begatto (2003), supports the claim of this *Comment and Correction* that there is no reason to think that the creativity used for personal or everyday ends differs from Pro *C* or Big *C*. They are different, but not because of the creativity involved. They all depend on the same creativity. They differ mostly in things that occur after the creative act.

None of this implies that eminent creators are the same as everyone else. They have idiosyncrasies. But they do not have a unique creative process that everyone else lacks.

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are several ways to describe the different expressions of creativity while avoiding the problems that result from the Big *C*/little *c* distinction. The distinction between *objective* and *subjective* creativity (Stein, 1953) is quite good, as is the distinction between *historical and psychological creativity* (Boden, 2003). Even discussions of

products and processes can be useful (Runco, 2007). The best approach may be to completely avoid the noun, *creativity*, and instead only use the adjective, *creative*. That would require specificity (i.e., what is the adjective modifying?) which, in turn, would require that the particular expression of creativity is made explicit. Why not refer to a child’s creative potential, or a famous person’s creative achievement? Why not be specific about a creative product, a creative trait or attitude, or a creative accomplishment or performance? What is most relevant here is that using the adjective and some precise noun (e.g., product, achievement, process) would help one avoid misleading connotations of Big *C*/little *c* dichotomy.

Certainly the educational implications are much more important than “the academic vernacular.” The main educational consideration is that avoiding the Big *C*/little *c* distinction is more consistent with the educational practice of looking for creative potential in all students, not just those who express their originality in socially-recognized products and performances. Education for creativity should focus on the fulfillment of potential, even if the potential by itself does not “change the way other people think” and is not expressed in an award-winning product.

Little *c* creativity is meaningful in and of itself. This is in part because it is not really extricable from Big *C* creativity. Little *c* creativity may develop into Big *C* creativity. Big *C* creativity involves things that lead to social recognition, but the creativity results from the same process that is involved in little *c* creativity. Big *C* and little *c* creativity truly represents a false dichotomy. If that dichotomy is replaced with thinking that acknowledges the continuity of creative potential with actual creative performance, research on the topic will be more realistic and accurate and education and enhancement efforts more likely to succeed.

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