



The liberating consequences of creative work: How a creative outlet lifts the physical burden of secrecy



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Working on a creative task can lift the burden of secrecy without confession.
- Creative work feels liberating.
- Engaging in creative work has emotional, physical and social consequences.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 March 2014

Revised 23 February 2015

Available online 1 April 2015

Keywords:

Secrecy
Creativity
Embodiment
Metaphor

ABSTRACT

A newly emerging stream of research suggests creativity can be fruitfully explored, not as an outcome variable, but as a contributor to the general cognitive and behavioral responding of the individual. In this paper, we extend this nascent area of research on the consequences of creativity by showing that working on a creative task can contribute to feelings of liberation—feelings that can help people to overcome psychological burdens. We illustrate the liberating effects of creativity by integrating the embodied cognition literature with recent research showing that keeping a secret is experienced as a psychological and physical burden.

While secrecy is metaphorically related to physical burden, creativity is metaphorically associated with freedom to “think outside the box” and explore beyond normal constraints. Thus, we predict permission to be creative may actually feel liberating and feelings of liberation may, in turn, lift the physical burden of keeping a big secret. The results of three studies supported our prediction and suggest that the opportunity to be creative may be a way for people to unburden without directly revealing secrets that could cause shame and embarrassment. We discuss the implications of our results for future research on the psychological consequences of performing creative work.

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“Having a creative outlet is really the best thing that you can do for yourself.”

[*Eddie Brickell, singer-songwriter*]

Creative ideas are highly desirable because they have the potential to fuel scientific progress, spark social change, and even generate profit (George, 2007; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Runco, 2004). Given the presumed value of creative solutions, it is not surprising that research on the conditions that foster creative output continues to grow (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). Yet, in contrast to the long stream of research on the conditions that foster creativity, much less attention has been paid to the question of whether creativity might have downstream consequences. Ironically, the sparse research that does exist

has focused mainly on the downside consequences of being creative. For example, individuals who share a creative idea at work risk being pegged as quirky, unpredictable and unfit for leadership positions (Mueller, Goncalo, & Kamdar, 2011). And, people who view themselves as highly creative may be prone to feelings of entitlement that license the commission of dishonest acts (Vincent, 2013). Indeed, merely priming the concept of creativity can trigger dishonesty (Gino & Ariely, 2012). The consequences of creativity are not necessarily negative, however. Other research has shown that priming creativity can help people overcome the tendency to inadvertently plagiarize existing ideas by making salient examples less accessible during idea generation (Sassenberg, Kessler, & Mummendey, 2007). By reducing the automatic activation of associations, creativity priming can also prevent the triggering of negative stereotypes (Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005).

The promise of this newly emerging stream of research is that it suggests creativity can be fruitfully explored, not as an outcome variable, but as a contributor to the general cognitive and behavioral responding of the individual. In this paper, we extend this nascent

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area of research on the consequences of creativity by showing that working on a creative task can contribute to feelings of liberation—feelings that can help people to overcome psychological burdens. We illustrate the liberating effects of creativity by integrating work on the embodiment of creativity with recent research showing that keeping a secret is experienced as a psychological and physical burden.

Unburdening: the liberating experience of creative work

The distinguishing characteristic of a creative idea over an idea that is merely practical is that creative ideas diverge from existing solutions in a novel direction (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005). Hence, the act of being creative is metaphorically associated with freedom to “think outside the box” and explore beyond normal constraints (Leung et al., 2012). Enacting metaphors for creativity like “think outside the box” have been shown to actually boost creative problem solving, suggesting a mind-body linkage between creativity and feeling liberated as opposed to confined (Leung et al., 2012). For example, problem solvers who were seated inside of a box were less creative than those seated outside of a box, even if the box was merely a shape taped to the floor (Leung et al., 2012). Research linking creativity to dishonesty also supports this metaphorical link between creativity and freedom to test the boundaries of convention. Creativity, through its association with rule-breaking can help individuals to lift the constraints on generating unconventional ideas while, unfortunately, also lifting the constraints on being truthful (Gino & Ariely, 2012; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014). This metaphorical association between creativity and liberation from constraint may be bi-directional. In other words, if embodying liberation versus constraint impacts creative problem solving (Leung et al., 2012), then performing a creative task may also feel liberating.

The burden of keeping a secret is one type of psychological burden that might illustrate the potentially liberating consequences of doing creative work. Many people keep secrets at the expense of their health and well-being (Kelly, 2002; Pennebaker, 1989). Keeping a secret, particularly a big secret, can cause stress and deplete cognitive resources (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Lane & Wegner, 1995). Recent research has drawn on the embodied cognition perspective to argue that secrets are also physically burdensome (Slepian, Masicampo, Toosi, & Ambady, 2012). According to this perspective, abstract concepts can become intertwined with physical experiences and eventually attain a reality of their own (Barsalou, 2008). For example, people rate a stranger's personality as warmer when holding a warm as opposed to a cold beverage (Williams & Bargh, 2008). Because secrets are metaphorically understood as physical burdens (e.g., carrying a secret weighs you down), people can actually experience the physical sensation of being “weighted down” when keeping a secret (Slepian et al., 2012). When people feel physically burdened, physical tasks are judged to require more effort (Proffitt, 2006). Hence, several studies have shown that people who keep a secret estimate that hills will be steeper and distances will be farther (Slepian et al., 2012). They are also less likely to help people with tasks, like carrying books, that require physical effort (Slepian et al., 2012).

Secrets vary in intensity and severity. For instance, though observers may render harsh judgments of a target individual who admits to immoral thoughts (Cohen & Rozin, 2001), keeping a secret about being unfaithful to a significant other is more psychologically significant than merely thinking about being unfaithful (Vrij, Nunkoosing, Paterson, Oosterwegel, & Soukara, 2002). Compared to a smaller secret, maintaining a big secret has more serious physical, psychological, and emotional costs. For instance, individuals keeping a big secret report significantly lower self-esteem, satisfaction with life, physical well-being, social well-being, and emotional well-being (Vrij et al., 2002). In a more recent study, participants who were instructed to think about a big secret reported feeling greater physical burden and reported that physical tasks would require more effort and energy

than participants who were instructed to think about non-significant, small secrets (Slepian et al., 2012). The burden of secrecy can be lifted by directly revealing the secret (Slepian, Masicampo, & Ambady, 2014). For example, thinking about a secret makes a hill appear steeper, but revealing a secret eliminates the effect (Slepian et al., 2014). Yet, there are many circumstances in which revealing a secret might have significant negative consequences. Indeed, the most common secrets are harbored to avoid shame or embarrassment (Maas, Wismeijer, Van Assen, & Aquarius, 2012). Thus, revealing a secret, though unburdening, may cause harm.

We argue that the burden of keeping a big secret may also be mitigated by giving individuals the opportunity to work on a creative task, even if that task does not afford the opportunity to confess. People who keep a big secret may be forced to actively suppress thoughts that are unwelcomed and intrusive (Slepian et al., 2014). In other words, keeping a big secret constrains people to a ruminative focus on suppressing unwanted thoughts (Gold & Wegner, 1995). Instructions to be creative, by priming the expectation to “think different” helps individuals to break away from the constraining effects of existing knowledge to generate a wider range of ideas (Sassenberg et al., 2007). Less creative thinkers tend to focus their thoughts narrowly around one theme or category—generating many ideas that are highly similar to each other—while more creative thinkers feel free to jump around between categories—generating many ideas that are distinct from each other (Brown & Paulus, 2002; Goncalo & Staw, 2006). Being creative might relieve the burden of secrecy by permitting uninhibited exploration—roaming freely across the boundaries between different types of ideas rather than being constrained to consider a narrow set of ideas within only one category or theme—a process that is likely to feel liberating. Thus, we expect that the opportunity to be creative will trigger feelings of liberation which will, in turn, lift the physical burden of keeping a big secret. That is, we expect to replicate previous findings demonstrating the physical burden of keeping a big secret across our control conditions—an effect that should be eliminated when individuals are permitted to be creative.

Overview of current research

We test these predictions in three studies in which we ask participants to recall either a small or big secret and then give them the opportunity to generate ideas before engaging in a task that measures a sense of physical burden. In studies 1 and 2, we manipulate task objectives by asking participants to generate ideas that are either creative or practical depending on the condition to which they were randomly assigned. We theorized that the unburdening effect of being creative should be strongest when individuals are allowed to generate ideas without restrictions. Consequently, in study 3, we varied task objectives such that participants were asked to either restrict their idea generation to only one general category of ideas or to generate ideas without any restrictions. Across all three studies, we measure feelings of liberation directly to trace the underlying psychological process through which creativity lifts the burden of secrecy.

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

107 participants from a large U.S. university (39% male; *M*age = 19.5 years) participated for course credit. Our sample size was the entire course, and we stopped data collection once everyone in the course had been given the opportunity to participate. Participants were told that they would be taking part in a study regarding the psychology of secrets. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. The experiment was a 2 (Secret: big versus small) × 2 (Idea generation: creative versus practical) factorial design.

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