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Creative writers' experience of self-determination: An examination within the grounded theory framework



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to apply grounded theory methodology to an examination of creativity and self-determination among four amateur creative writers. Applying a grounded theory approach to their interview responses, revealed a novel middle-range theory for the role of autonomy. For these respondents, autonomy is necessary, yet not by itself sufficient for their creative writing. A model of self-determination is posited with autonomy as the core category and authorship beliefs and autonomous regulation of the creative process as sub-categories. Based on this model, autonomy-supportive surroundings are reported as positively influencing the development of these respondents' creative talents. Subject to further research, this model may be considered in the design of creativity-fostering environments.

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1. Introduction

Despite numerous studies on self-determination and creativity (e.g. Hennessey, 2000; Sheldon, 1995), little is known about the role of self-determination in creative writing. Much of the existing literature on these subjects has been focused on quantitative methods in studying creativity and autonomy or motivation (e.g. Chang, Huang, & Choi, 2012; Cooper & Jayatilaka, 2006; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001; Friedman, 2009). Nevertheless, it seems that qualitative methods (such as grounded theory) can provide novel and valuable insights into experience of writers intrinsically motivated to continue their creative pursuits. Autonomy can play a different role in creative problem-solving and in everyday work of professional creators. First is presented a review of the self-determination theory and the present state of research on autonomy in writers. Second, how grounded theory can provide a unique contribution to the research on autonomy among creative writers.

1.1. Self-determination theory and autonomy

In the present study, the concept of autonomy is derived from the self-determination theory. According to this theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), every individual has three basic psychological needs: a need of autonomy, a need of competence, and a need of relatedness. These innate human needs are the basis for self-motivation. All of them are essential in facilitating tendencies for growth, development, and well-being (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006).

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“Autonomy” applies to actions that are initiated by one’s self and are willingly undertaken (Ryan et al., 2006). Creative writing can be considered one possible form of such activities, as individuals usually initiate it on their own, very often as a part of their hobby. Autonomous behavior is informed by one’s true needs and values, is reflective, and respects current situational circumstances (Ryan et al., 2006). Thus, an autonomous individual is fully engaged in achieving his or her goals. An individual who acts autonomously experiences more positive feelings, has an enhanced sense of self, and is more persistent than a person who acts heteronomously (Ryan et al., 2006). The characteristics mentioned above seem to fit to experiences found in creative work, also in creative writing. These observations have become the rationale of undertaking research on the relationship between creativity and autonomy in creative writers.

1.2. *The role of autonomy in creative writing*

A current literature search suggest that this is the first study to directly examine the role of autonomy in creative writing. Research conducted by Sheldon (1995) does show links between self-determination and creativity. According to Sheldon (1995) all creative persons are autonomous, but not every autonomous person is creative.

Studies linking motivation and creativity (Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001; Eisenberger & Shanock, 2003; Friedman, 2009), explore the influence of rewards on both motivation and creativity, however such studies focus on single creative tasks and do not distinguish different areas and forms of creativity.

1.3. *Grounded theory and the study of creative writing*

The grounded theory approach was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967/2012). It serves as a tool for developing a theory based on systematically gathered empirical evidence. This development is an inductive process rather than verification of prior hypotheses. In early stages of data analysis, it is required to reduce pre-conceptualizations, and concentrate on detailed description of empirical data. Such procedure makes it possible to discover and include into a theoretical framework new phenomena. The emerging theory should be logically consistent, clear and dense, fitted to the reality, relevant to the given research domain, able to explain and anticipate phenomena in the domain and be modifiable in case of inconsistency or poor fit (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012). A key feature of grounded theory, is that it remains subject to experimental verification. Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012 emphasize that grounded theory is not constructed but rather emerges from data, independently from researcher’s a priori assumptions.

Three main elements of grounded theory are: categories, their properties, and hypotheses. Categories are generated from empirical evidence. A core category is a category central and most important for the theory to work. Categories may be borrowed from other theories (such as borrowing the category of autonomy from self-determination theory), but they should be carefully controlled for their fit to empirical data. Hypotheses pertain to relations between categories and are verified by means of comparison of their functioning in different contexts and social situations. A hypothesis verified in all available contexts is considered grounded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012).

The aim of this study was to explain the role of autonomy in the creative process. The category of autonomy derived from self-determination theory was the first category included in emerging grounded theory and self-determination theory was treated as data source.

1.4. *The present study*

The aim of this study was to examine the role of autonomy in the experience of creative writers. To date, there has been little research on the role of self-determination and autonomy in the creative process of professional writers or other professional artists. Studies addressing the topic (e.g. Sheldon, 1995) examined the relationship between autonomy and creativity in the general population. Other studies (e.g. Chang et al., 2012) focused predominantly on experimental investigations of problem-solving, and did not cover the whole range of artists’ experiences. In the current study, the qualitative method was chosen because of its openness to new data and its generative character. The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012) enabled the construction of a middle-range theory of the role of autonomy in artists’ creativity. “Middle-range” theory should be understood as in Glaser and Strauss (1967/2012): “they fall between minor working hypotheses (. . .) and the all-inclusive grand theories”.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants*

Two men and two women between the age of 22 and 25 were interviewed. The participants were recruited on the Internet literary forum for amateur writers. The invitation to take part in the study was sent to the authors whose works received positive comments from other authors on the forum and who had been publishing their works for a relatively long time. These respondents are peer accredited creative authors and, as such, their selection here as research participants mirrors criteria employed by Amabile, (1983).

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