



Why do we enjoy creative tasks? Results from a multigroup randomized controlled study



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have linked positive emotions with creativity, but it remains unknown why creative activities may enhance positive emotions. We tested how creative tasks influence autonomous self-expression and task absorption, and whether this in turn increases positive emotions. Data from 478 participants were divided into four language samples (English, German, Italian, and Polish) and analyzed in a series of multigroup structural equation models. The indirect effects were replicated in all samples. Creative tasks enhanced positive emotions through an increase in autonomy. However, participants who solved creative tasks also reported lower task absorption, and this has hindered their experience of positive emotions. In total, a small increase of positive emotions was recorded for creative tasks in comparison to non-creative ones. We suggest that creative activities may support autonomous functioning and enhance positive emotions, given that participants will stay sufficiently focused on the task.

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1. Introduction

The power of positive emotions to unleash creativity has been repeatedly verified. Two meta-analyses confirmed that positive mood enhances creativity (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Davis, 2009). Interestingly, creative activities may further improve emotional well-being, forming a gain spiral (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Bar, 2009; Richards, 2010). Even though an increase in positive emotions during creative activities has been previously hypothesized, circumstances when it occurs remain unknown. Thus, an investigation into whether and why creative tasks might enhance positive emotions forms the main theoretical contribution of this study. We argue that tasks requiring creativity may support autonomous self-expression, and this in turn enhances positive emotions. Our empirical strategy is based on randomized control trial methodology applied in multiple group setting. We investigate how creative tasks – in comparison to non-creative ones and across four diverse samples – influence feelings of autonomy, task absorption, and positive emotions. Such complex and

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robust empirical test gives our findings a chance to significantly contribute to the body of evidence connecting creativity with positive emotions.

1.1. Creativity and positive emotions

Creative activities have been widely used as a tool to improve mood. Clinicians have employed creative tasks during occupational therapies (Leckey, 2011), and mental health rehabilitation (Van Lith, Schofield, & Fenner, 2013). Creative activities were shown to alleviate depressive symptoms amongst cancer patients (Bar-Sela, Atid, Danos, Gabay, & Epelbaum, 2007), mental health patients (Caddy, Crawford, & Page, 2012), and prison inmates (Gussak, 2006). In an experimental setting, unstructured writing or drawing improved the mood of participants who previously viewed a disturbing video (De Petrillo & Winner, 2005; Drake, Coleman, & Winner, 2011). Similar effects occurred in non-clinical samples (Bell & Robbins 2007; Drake, Searight, & Olson-Pupek, 2014). These findings suggest that creativity can reduce negative mood, but further changes from neutral to positive emotional state still await verification (Forgeard & Eichner, 2014).

Creativity is often considered a desirable feature due to its relationship with positive personality traits such as openness, curiosity, humor and flexibility (e.g., Cropley, 1990). Hence, creativity is listed as one of the character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Previous findings suggest that strength-based interventions effectively increase positive emotions and life satisfaction (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013). Using strengths in a novel and original way led to an increase in happiness in six months following the intervention (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). However, these studies investigated the role of several different character strengths, thus an isolated impact of creativity on emotional well-being remains unknown.

Only recently have researchers started to examine specific effects of creative activity on positive emotions. Silvia et al. (2014) have found that doing something creative at a given moment correlates with feeling happy and energetic at that moment. Moneta (2012) has shown that having an opportunity to be creative at work triggers positive emotions. However, experimental studies on this topic brought unclear results: solving a divergent thinking task led to enhanced positive mood in one experiment (Akbari Chermahini & Hommel, 2012), but in the other study a creative task hindered positive emotions (Cseh, Phillips, & Pearson, 2014). Further research is needed to clarify these contradictory results. We aim at experimentally test whether an involvement in creative activities improves the level of experienced positive emotions.

Hypothesis 1. Creative tasks would enhance positive emotions.

1.2. Creativity and autonomy

Autonomy refers to an experience of ownership and volition of one's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Such sense of volition can be achieved for example by having an opportunity to make independent choices and express personal opinions (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). Offering choices supports autonomous expression of behavior, and is defined as one of the conditions for autonomy (Su & Reeve, 2011). Thus, a task instruction that encourages self-expression may enhance participants' autonomous motivation (e.g., Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001). Creative activities may also promote autonomous self-expression due to their focus on originality and novelty. Creative tasks usually read as follows: compose a drawing of your own choice (Fink, Benedek, Grabner, Staudt, & Neubauer, 2007), write down your most interesting thoughts (Conti, Amabile, & Pollak, 1995), note your own original ideas (Bechtoldt, Choi, & Nijstad, 2012), and express your own opinions (Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). Thus, autonomy may increase during creative activities as they encourage autonomous self-expression.

Furthermore, both theory and empirical evidence justify the existence of a link between autonomy and positive emotions. Proponents of the self-determination theory classify autonomy as one of the basic psychological needs (together with relatedness and competence; Deci & Ryan, 2000). They argue that the fulfillment of basic needs supports well-being, and mediates the effects of situational factors on well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2011; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). Experiencing high levels of autonomy has been linked to positive emotions, including classroom engagement (Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012), interest and enjoyment (Benita, Roth, & Deci, 2014), and psychological well-being across different cultures (Chen et al., 2015). We aim at testing whether creative tasks promote autonomy, and thus indirectly enhance positive emotions.

Hypothesis 2. Creative tasks would indirectly enhance positive emotions through an increase in autonomy.

1.3. Creativity and task absorption

Creative tasks are loosely formulated and can be solved in many different ways. No ultimate test exists for an assessment of validity or quality of their solutions (Coyne, 2005). Open formulation of the problem may present an exciting opportunity, but it also makes the results of a creative activity hard to predict. Such lack of a clear objective may decrease task absorption (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002). Besides, performance in divergent thinking tasks requires effortful control, an executive cognitive function that helps staying focused on the task (Lin, Hsu, Chen, & Chang, 2013). Thus, it might be more difficult to resist distraction during a creative task in comparison to a non-creative, well-defined task.

Moreover, the creative process is characterized by a broad attention span (Kasof, 1997). Narrowing the field of attention has null or even negative effect on creativity (Baas, Nevecka, & Ten Velden, 2014; Colzato, Szapora, Lippelt, & Hommel, 2014), while allowing the mind to wander facilitates creative problem solving (Baird et al., 2012). Creative thinkers easily notice

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