



Creativity development in community contexts: The case of folk art



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of creativity in the context of folk art within an urban and rural community in Romania. It adopts a cultural psychological perspective on development, linking it to children's participation in community activities, as well as creativity, considered in relation to the emergence and use of the symbolic function within child–adult interactions. Easter egg decoration offers an excellent case study for an investigation of children's developing engagement with a cultural practice and, in this research, first and fourth graders (age 7 and 10), from Bucharest and the village of Ciocănești, were asked to draw a typical Easter egg from home and the Easter egg they want, and then interviewed about their drawings. Content analysis revealed two broad patterns of engagement with the craft – making the unfamiliar familiar and making the familiar unfamiliar – discussed here in terms of developmental tendencies and socialisation practices, as well as their implications for how we understand and foster children's creative expression.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the creative expression of children by examining their engagement with the folk art of Easter egg decoration in an urban and rural community in Romania. At a theoretical level, it considers creativity development from a socio-cultural perspective and links it to the emergence of the symbolic function and children's capacity to construct representations that mediate their relationship with the world. This function, following the *Vygotskian (1978)* tradition, is central for the psychological development of the child and supported by constant interactions with adults. However, creativity research on children has been traditionally preoccupied with testing creative potential and using tasks that, although appropriate for this age group, can be slightly artificial (and problematic when it comes to construct validity, see *Almeida, Prieto, Ferrando, Oliveira, & Ferrándiz, 2008*). The study presented here aims to consider children's creative activity within the context of *an existing cultural practice* and this sets it apart from most other investigations of creativity in childhood.

Easter egg decoration is widespread in Romanian communities and offers an ideal occasion for children to express their creative potential (ornamenting eggs or drawing them on paper). Our exploration of this practice though will not be a psychometric one. The following research does not focus on “how creative children are” (by evaluating drawings of Easter eggs) but rather on “how children are creative”. What is of interest is not to measure creativity but to understand the ways in which it becomes manifest in the case of two age groups (7- and 10-year olds), in two different milieus (the capital, Bucharest, and the village of Ciocănești). The Romanian context is particularly interesting considering the fact that children, especially in rural settings, are in contact from early on with a variety of crafts and traditions that both define and contribute to community life (*Zahacinschi & Zahacinschi, 1985*). It becomes thus all the more important to understand if and how socialisation within different communities (urban and rural) shapes artistic creative expression.

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2. Theoretical background: creativity and development in a community context

Cultural psychological approaches start from the premise that human development, including the development of creativity, is *community-based and culture-inclusive* (see Josephs & Valsiner, 2007). This assumption has been elaborated by theorists such as Rogoff (2003, pp. 3–4), who stated that “people develop as participants in cultural communities” and development itself can be understood only with reference to the cultural practices and circumstances of these communities. Lave (1991, pp. 64–65), as well, emphasised the fact that learning is a social phenomenon constituted through participation in “communities of practice”. In light of this, Easter egg decoration is a good example of children’s developing creative engagement within the cultural traditions of their community. Engagement here is considered *creative* whenever it adds an “unfamiliar” element, for as minor and idiosyncratic as it may be, to a traditional procedure. This element of creativity makes cultural practices hugely diverse, finding different manifestations in different communities, often within the same society. Individual engagement with craftwork in this study thus needs to be evaluated locally and contextually, and necessarily linked to wider processes of socialisation and enculturation.

The term *socialisation* often carries with it an unwanted image of the child as initially “outside” of culture and society and gradually becoming “filled up” by both, shaped and determined by external, socialising forces. A deterministic model is thus set in place, in which children start off as passive and asocial beings. In contrast, the perspective on socialisation and enculturation processes adopted in this article stresses their fundamentally active and constructive nature (Valsiner, 1997). There is interpretation and transformation when things are internalised by the child as much as when they are externalised (Kuczynski & Navara, 2006), and this contributes to the dynamic character of cultural practices and, with them, of community life itself. This approach considers thus socialisation and creativity to be fundamentally related since learning the “ways” of one’s community offers a framework for novel expressions *without* fully determining them. Children’s creative activity is fostered by interactions with others and the assimilation of culture precisely because children are agents and not passive recipients of acculturation practices (Bruner, 1999).

Much of this vision and cultural psychological approach are indebted to the groundbreaking work of Vygotsky (1978), for whom the internalisation and creative use of tools and signs – forms of mediation between subject and world and subject and herself, respectively – represents a momentous achievement in our existence as human beings. It is when children begin to articulate language and symbolic systems that they start to master situations and master themselves, to regulate activity with the help of speech (first external and gradually internalised), to plan ahead and escape the constraints of the “here and now”. For Vygotsky, the symbolic function and use of language are inconceivable outside a social environment and child–adult relations. Important for the present discussion, the origins of creativity can be found in this process of passing from direct to mediated forms of behaviour (Vygotsky, 2004), something reflective of our capacity for *symbolic representation*.

Indeed, to represent “is central to the ontogenetic development of the human child” (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 10) and also the development of creativity. At about one and a half years of age, children become able to represent something (the referent) with the means of something else (the sign) – the origins of the symbolic or semiotic function (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966). Being capable of symbolic activity is an enormous achievement, “in a sense, the greatest imaginative leap of all” (Gardner, 1982, p. 170), and offers the basis for later creative expression, from free play to high art and science. The *theory of social representations* (SRT) can provide a useful framework in this regard, based on its recognition for the social and creative dimensions of knowledge systems and their evolving nature from early childhood onwards (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Moscovici, 1984). Initially, all children are born into a world “already structured by the social representation of the communities into which they arrive” (Duveen, 2001, p. 259). Children gradually acquire the symbolic systems of representation specific to their particular socio-cultural location, making what was at first unfamiliar to them familiar through integration in their developing knowledge systems.

Of key importance for SRT, children “tame” unfamiliarity in a *potentially creative and constructive manner*, not copying but selectively appropriating representations while acting in the world and communicating with others (in line with the active and selective notion of internalisation adopted here). As they grow, children come to express their creativity as well by elaborating further, and sometimes problematising, established norms and representations, thus turning the familiar unfamiliar (Wagoner, 2008) and, in the process, generating new symbolic (and material) means. Literature on enculturation points to similar actions when distinguishing between mechanisms of *acquiring and inquiring* (Shimahara, 1970), of assimilating cultural norms and practices and transforming them through personal engagement. It is these two types of dynamic that will be used later in this article to conceptualise children’s creativity in Easter egg decoration and its developmental trajectory.

3. Research context and rationale for the study

Much has been written about children and art (see Fox & Schirrmacher, 2012; Gardner, 1982; Hurwitz & Day, 2007) but little interest showed until now towards a cultural practice such as folk art. This is an important domain, however, since artistic expression in the case of children is typically both expressive of acculturation and socialisation procedures (as argued above), and a key contributor to these processes. The general aim of this research therefore is to explore the developing engagement of children with a creative type of activity – Easter egg decoration – in two different settings in Romania: the urban milieu of Bucharest and rural community of Ciocănești. This folk art was chosen considering its *richness of practices and associated symbolic meanings* as well as its *deep connections to community life* (Newall, 1971). Indeed,

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