



# Subjective experiences of creative work after negative feedback



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 February 2014  
Received in revised form 12 June 2014  
Accepted 9 November 2014  
Available online 15 November 2014

### Keywords:

Creativity  
Negative feedback  
Interviews  
Evaluation apprehension  
Self-efficacy

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated thoughts, feelings and actions when working on a divergent-thinking task after receiving negative feedback on a problem-solving task. Eleven university students were interviewed after working on an unsolvable version of the Necklace Problem and three situations of the Dramatic Events Test. They also rated response contentment on the Dramatic Events Test. The interviews were analyzed by interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results showed that the less-content respondents experienced stress due to situational demands, were anxious to meet perceived criteria, expressed fear of being evaluated by others, and expressed uncertainty about the responses. These respondents also often erased or withheld responses they felt did not meet perceived criteria. It was more common for the content respondents to adapt to situational demands or take them as a challenge, view the failure on the problem-solving task as a motivation to perform better on the subsequent test, not be afraid of criticism from others, and view ideas as changeable. The results are discussed with regard to attention, perfectionism, convergent thinking, intrinsic motivation, evaluation apprehension, and self-efficacy.

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## 1. Introduction

Creativity is a broad concept, and the most widespread definition of a creative idea is that it is both new and has some value or usefulness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). It is difficult to capture every aspect of creativity in research studies, and much research on the topic has been performed using tests of divergent thinking (Zeng, Proctor, & Salvendy, 2011). Divergent thinking indicates thinking in a broad manner, and thinking of many different possibilities (Guilford, 1957). Divergent thinking has been linked to ideation, and tests of divergent thinking usually measure fluency (number of ideas), flexibility of the ideas, and originality of the ideas (e.g. Plucker, Qian, & Wang, 2011). However, it is important to point out that divergent thinking does not capture all aspects of the creative process (Zeng, Proctor, & Salvendy, 2011).

One concern in the field of creativity is whether there is a connection between affect and creative performance. Research has mostly focused on positive affect, and studies have indicated that creativity is facilitated by positive affect (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Vosburg, 1998a). Vosburg (1998b) found that positive mood was related to number of ideas and flexibility, but not to the degree of originality and usefulness of the ideas. The view that positive affect promotes creative performance has, as a result, manifested in several ways in organizations. For example, criticism is ruled out when brainstorming (Osborn, 1957; Paulus, 2000), and

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harmony and encouragement are sought to enhance creative performance (Nemeth, Personnaz, Personnaz, & Goncalo, 2004).

Negative affect is less explored with regard to creativity, and results of studies are ambiguous. Some studies did not find any effect (e.g., Fernández-Abascal & Díaz, 2013; Grawitch, Munz, & Kramer, 2003; Vosburg, 1998b), or so small effect that it was without practical implication (Silvia & Kimbrel, 2010). George and Zhou (2002) showed that negative emotion can enhance creative performance under conditions where perceptions of recognition and clarity of feelings were high, and Carlsson (2002) showed that individuals with highly creative performance had higher self-ratings on trait anxiety than individuals with less creative performance. However, most studies confirm the view that negative affect impair creative performance. For example, Byron and Khazanchi (2011) performed a meta-study, and found that negative emotion impaired creative performance. Further, de Acedo Baquedano and de Acedo Lizarraga (2012) found anxiety to be a negative predictor of creative performance, and Vosburg (1998a) found that negative mood was associated with lower fluency on divergent thinking tasks. Baas et al. (2008) found that only negative mood associated with avoidance motivation, such as anxiety, was related to lower creativity. To, Fisher, Ashkanasy, and Rowe (2012) found that different types of negative mood affected creative performance in different ways; activating moods were positively related with creative process engagement (i.e., behaviors antecedent creative performance), whereas deactivating moods were negatively related with creative process engagement. Gasper (2004) found that participants in a sad mood produced fewer new responses on a creative task than participants in a happy mood. However, the difference between sad and happy moods disappeared when the participants were told that all responses were acceptable. Gasper suggested that this indicates that a sad mood affects how information is used, rather than the access of memories.

### 1.1. Effects of negative affect

Why is it, then, that negative affect might lead to hampered creative performance? There are theories and research that might explain a possible effect of negative affect on creative performance. Negative affect is generally associated with a narrow way of thinking and avoidant behavior, and it can impair performance (Hunt & Ellis, 2004). Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, and Calvo (2007) proposed an attentional-control theory, stating that anxiety affects performance by impairing attentional control and induce more usage of stimulus-driven attention. Thus, an anxious person would be more easily distracted by external and internal stimuli, especially by threatening stimuli. Therefore, one pays less attention to the task at hand, which leads to impairment of efficient cognitive processes. However, even though processing efficiency would be impaired, the actual performance does not have to be impaired if the individual initiates compensatory actions, such as increased work effort (Eysenck et al., 2007). One aspect of personality that could affect if attention will be impaired or if compensatory actions will be initiated might be perfectionism. *Positive-striving perfectionism* refers to wanting to reach high standards, and has been connected to high effort and test performance (Stoeber & Eismann, 2007). *Perfectionistic concerns* refer to concerns about mistakes, thinking of others' expectations, and negative reactions to imperfections. Further, negative reactions to imperfections are connected to fear of failure (Stoeber & Becker, 2008) and distress (Stoeber & Eismann, 2007).

According to Bush, Luu, and Posner (2000), cognitive and emotional tasks activate different parts of the cingulate cortex, where a cognitive task leads to deactivation of the emotional areas of the cingulate cortex, and vice versa. Further, Hodges (1968) showed that failure produced anxiety, especially in individuals with a high trait anxiety. Hence, a task leading to failure would negatively affect subsequent (cognitive) tasks. This has been used in several studies, where negative feedback (i.e. receiving information that one has failed on a task) has been used to produce negative mood (see for example Houser-Marko & Sheldon, 2008).

Failure could also affect self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), self-perceived efficacy will affect a person's behavior. Individuals have a tendency to avoid situations they perceive is beyond their capacity. Smith, Kass, Rotunda, and Schneider (2006) found that failure on a task requiring solving anagrams negatively affected mainly task-specific self-efficacy, and post-manipulation anagram-solving was impaired.

Several studies have shown a connection between self-efficacy and creative performance. People with high creative self-efficacy displayed a high level of creativity (e.g., Tierney & Farmer, 2002). In a longitudinal study, Tierney and Farmer (2011) showed that increases in supervisors' creative expectations was connected to increases in employees' creative self-efficacy, and increases in creative self-efficacy were connected to increases in creative performance.

In summary, research findings on negative affect and creativity are inconclusive, and show conflicting results. On the one hand, there are several studies showing a negative effect of negative affect on creative performance (e.g. Byron & Khazanchi, 2011), but on the other hand, there are several studies that did not show any effect (e.g. Grawitch et al., 2003), or obliterated the effect by changing the instruction for the creative task (Gasper, 2004). Previous studies have mainly focused on the creative product. Less is known about the impact of negative affect has on persons' motivation and perceptions of their own work on creative tasks. More research is needed in order to investigate how persons may perceive and reason about their work on a creative task after inducement of negative affect. One way to induce negative affect is to present negative feedback on a preceding task (i.e., feedback that one has failed the task), as failure is associated with anxiety (Hodges, 1968) and negative mood (Houser-Marko & Sheldon, 2008). Indeed, in today's working life negative feedback occur with increasing frequency, and individual interpretations and experiences of negative affect might provide insights of the impact negative affect can have on everyday creative performance. Thus, the aim of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how

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