



A motivational–cognitive model of creativity and the role of autonomy[☆]

Hua Li^{a,*}, Fuli Li^a, Tingting Chen^b

^a School of Management, Xi'an Jiaotong University, No. 28, Xianning West Road, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710049, China

^b Department of Management, Lingnan University, No. 8, Castle Peak Road, Tuen Mun, New Territories, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has questioned the assumed positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity. Going beyond previous studies that explored the question of “when” intrinsic motivation affects creativity, this research addresses the question of “how.” Drawing on motivated information processing theory, we propose a motivational–cognitive model of creativity, such that intrinsic motivation exerts a positive indirect effect on creativity through cognitive flexibility. Results from two field studies provide convincing empirical evidence for our central hypothesis. To further explore how the motivational–cognitive processes to creativity are stimulated, we identify job autonomy as a contextual antecedent and find that job autonomy is positively and serially related to creativity through intrinsic motivation and cognitive flexibility. Moreover, such a serial mediating effect is stronger when supervisory autonomy support is high. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Creativity, defined as the generation of novel and potentially useful ideas, products, or procedures (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004), is crucial to organizational survival and success (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). Research has explored the drivers of individual creativity; in particular, intrinsic motivation has received the most scholarly attention (Amabile, 1996; Shalley et al., 2004). Scholars have long argued that intrinsic motivation drives individuals to be curious, take risks, break routines, and persist despite obstacles (Amabile, 1988; McGraw & Fiala, 1982), thereby stimulating creativity (Amabile, 1988; Shin & Zhou, 2003).

However, despite the eloquent theoretical argument, empirical evidence has shown that the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity is mixed (for reviews, see George, 2007; Shalley et al., 2004). For example, Shalley and Perry-Smith (2001), based on an experimental design, revealed a weak relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity. Moreover, certain field studies found a weak or non-significant association between intrinsic motivation and creativity (Dewett, 2007; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). In light of the inconclusive empirical evidence, George (2007) suggested against taking the relationship between intrinsic motivation and individual creativity for granted but rather tackling “this theorized linkage more directly and in more depth” (p. 445).

To account for this mixed relationship, some scholars have explored

the boundary conditions that qualify the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity, including prosocial motivation as well as perspective taking (Grant & Berry, 2011), and individualism as well as tightness (Liu, Jiang, Shalley, Keem, & Zhou, 2016). Despite the theoretical advancement in determining *when* intrinsic motivation affects creativity, the question of *how* remains unanswered. The relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity may be distal, and clarifying the underlying mechanisms involved is important for a comprehensive understanding of the effect of intrinsic motivation on creativity.

To fill this gap, we draw on motivated information processing theory from social psychology (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998) to gain an understanding of the cognitive mechanism involved. This theory proposes that people tend to select, notice, and retain information that is consistent with their desires (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). Individuals with high intrinsic motivation have strong desires to seek out challenges and learning opportunities as well as engage in explorations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hence, they tend to satisfy their inner desires by directing their attention toward new experiences, novel ideas (Fredrickson, 1998; Izard, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and unusual but relevant associations (Isen & Daubman, 1984; Isen, Johnson, Mertz, & Robinson, 1985). To capture such information processing, we bring in the concept *cognitive flexibility* because it reflects the readiness to develop new viewpoints, alter or build uncommon and disparate associations, and exhibit broad and inclusive cognitive categorization (Isen, Niedenthal, & Cantor, 1992; Mikulincer & Sheffi, 2000; Murray, Sujan,

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: fion3113092007@stu.xjtu.edu.cn (H. Li), fuli@mail.xjtu.edu.cn (F. Li), tingtingchen@ln.edu.hk (T. Chen).

Hirt, & Sujan, 1990). Research reveals that cognitive flexibility is conducive to the generation of creative ideas (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008). Hence, we propose a motivational-cognitive model of creativity in which cognitive flexibility acts as a mediator that relates intrinsic motivation to individual creativity.

The second objective of this research is to investigate how the proposed motivational-cognitive processes to creativity can be triggered. We draw on self-determination theory (SDT) (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to contend that job autonomy, which satisfies the needs for autonomy and competence, is an important contextual driver of the motivational-cognitive processes to creativity. That is, job autonomy has a positive indirect effect on creativity serially through intrinsic motivation and cognitive flexibility. To provide further evidence for the validity of the proposed serial mediating process, the third objective of this study is to investigate the circumstances under which the effect of job autonomy on the motivational-cognitive processes is strengthened. The quality of interaction with significant others, such as supervisors, influences the sense of autonomy (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004) and perceived intrinsic motivation (Gagné, 2003); hence, we propose supervisory autonomy support as a critical boundary condition that affects the effect of job autonomy on intrinsic motivation. Further, the consistency or inconsistency of job autonomy and supervisory autonomy support is expected to strengthen or weaken the proposed motivational-cognitive processes to creativity.

Our research makes three major contributions to the literature. First, by identifying cognitive flexibility as a key cognitive mechanism, we respond to the calls of George (2007) and Shalley et al. (2004) to propose a motivational-cognitive model of creativity, thus providing an in-depth understanding of how intrinsic motivation affects creativity. Second, we introduce job autonomy as a key contextual driver that can trigger the motivational-cognitive processes to creativity. Third, we enrich the interactionist perspective (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) by elaborating how the consistency or inconsistency of job autonomy and supervisory autonomy support affects the proposed motivational-cognitive processes to creativity. Fig. 1 presents the hypothesized research model.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. Intrinsic motivation and creativity

Creativity, essentially a cognitive activity, is triggered by motivation (Amabile, 1996). Thus, investigating the motivational mechanisms is an important research stream of creativity (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). In particular, intrinsic motivation, a crucial intra-individual component of creativity (Amabile, 1996), has long been regarded as a key factor that stimulates creativity. For instance, Simon (1967) indicated that intrinsic motivation functions as control of attention. Liu et al. (2016) argued the role of intrinsic motivation in affecting creativity as “want to

motivational forces” (p. 237), which elicits curiosity, interest, and enjoyment from the task at hand (Amabile, 1988, 1996). Along this line of theorizing, Zhang and Bartol (2010) contended that intrinsically motivated individuals are likely to engage in creative processes, including problem identification, as well as creative ideas generation and evaluation. The literature also suggested that intrinsic motivation facilitates the willingness to take risks, mobilizes sustained effort, and evokes perseverance when faced with difficulties or challenges (Amabile, 1996; Fredrickson, 1998), thereby promoting creativity.

However, contrary to the above speculation on the strong and proximal positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity, previous experimental and field studies found a weak positive, or even a non-significant relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity (e.g., Amabile, 1979; Dewett, 2007; Eisenberger & Aselage, 2009; Tierney et al., 1999). To address this complex relationship, Grant and Berry (2011) and Liu et al. (2016) explored the boundary conditions that qualify the effect of intrinsic motivation on creativity. These prior studies provide a clear explanation of “when” intrinsically motivated employees exhibit creativity. Another possible reason for the mixed empirical findings is that the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity may be distal and indirect. However, scant research has examined the question of “how,” that is, the underlying mechanisms through which intrinsic motivation boosts creativity.

2.2. A motivated information processing perspective on how intrinsic motivation affects creativity

To address this issue, we bring in the motivated information processing perspective (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998) to offer a plausible account of how intrinsic motivation affects creativity. The tenet of the motivated information processing theory is that the desires of individuals shape their cognitive processes (Kunda, 1990). As motivation reflects the inner desires of an individual (Grant, 2008), it may affect how people cognitively approach and process information. Past literature provided related theorizing on such speculation. For example, undergirded by epistemic motivation, or the desire to develop a deep and accurate understanding of the world, individuals tend to engage in systematic rather than heuristic processing of information (De Dreu, 2005; Scholten, van Knippenberg, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2007). In addition, De Dreu, Koole, and Steinel (2000) theorized that the egoistic or prosocial motives determine the information people focus on or dismiss. Further, Grant and Berry (2011) pointed out that the desire to benefit others predisposes prosocially motivated individuals to take the perspectives of others.

Therefore, we contend that intrinsically motivated individuals, driven by the desires to learn, challenge, and explore based on their interest in and enjoyment of a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000), are likely to extend themselves or seek out novelty by engaging in expansive or divergent thinking (Fredrickson, 1998), thus stimulating creativity (Guildford, 1959; Sternberg, 1988; Weisberg, 1988). To capture such

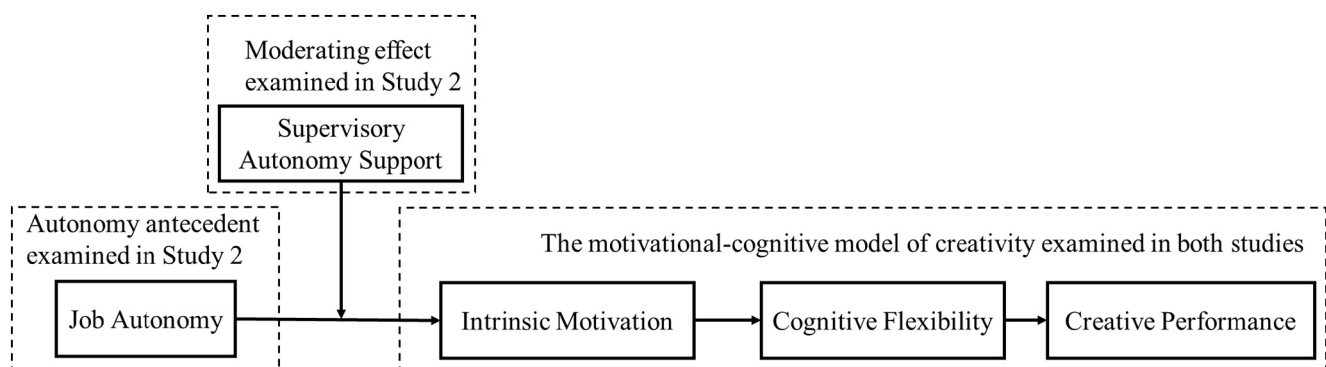


Fig. 1. Hypothesized research model.

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