

ORDINARY CREATIVITY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Developmental, Cognitive), Education, Behavioral Economics

1. Core Definition

Ordinary creativity refers to the widespread human capacity to generate novel and useful solutions or ideas in the context of daily life. It is fundamentally defined as the ability to engage in **divergent thinking**, which involves exploring multiple possible solutions or paths from a single starting point, resulting in unique and one-of-a-kind cognitive outcomes. Unlike the rare, monumental achievements associated with genius or historical transformation, ordinary creativity is accessible to virtually all individuals and is employed frequently in problem-solving, adaptation, and everyday decision-making. This concept is often categorized in psychological literature as "Little-c" creativity, distinguishing it sharply from "Big-C" creativity (Eminent Creativity), which denotes revolutionary, lasting contributions recognized internationally in a specific domain. Little-c is essential for navigating the complexities of personal, social, and professional challenges that do not necessarily require artistic or scientific breakthrough, but rather require personal resourcefulness and ingenuity.

The core of ordinary creativity lies not just in generating novel ideas, but in generating ideas that possess a degree of appropriateness or effectiveness within the given context. For instance, finding a creative solution to fix a broken household item or inventing an efficient way to organize a demanding schedule both represent acts of ordinary creativity. This inherent capacity underscores the belief that creativity is not a specialized talent reserved for an elite few, but a fundamental cognitive skill distributed across the general population. It is intimately linked with cognitive flexibility, allowing individuals to break free from conventional thought patterns and habitual responses, thereby enhancing adaptability and resilience in dynamic environments.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The systematic study of creativity emerged significantly in the mid-20th century, spurred by researchers like J.P. Guilford, who, in his 1950 presidential address to the American Psychological Association, challenged psychologists to investigate creativity beyond the confines of intelligence testing. Early research initially struggled to differentiate everyday creative thought from high-level genius, often focusing on the lives and characteristics of historically recognized innovators. However, as the field matured, the recognition grew that studying only eminent creators (Big-C) provided an incomplete picture of human ingenuity. This led to a critical paradigm shift toward understanding creativity as a continuum rather than a binary trait.

The formal conceptualization of ordinary creativity gained significant traction with the introduction

of multi-level models designed to capture the scope of creative expression. Among the most influential is the 4C Model of Creativity developed by James C. Kaufman and Ronald A. Beghetto. This model posited four distinct yet related categories: Mini-c, Little-c, Pro-c, and Big-C. Ordinary creativity most closely aligns with the **Little-c** level, defined as the constructive, non-eminent, daily expressions of creativity. Mini-c, which often precedes Little-c, refers to the novel and personally meaningful interpretations of experience, learning, and self-discovery, often internal and unseen by others. The introduction of these specific categories formalized the psychological recognition that routine, non-professional creative output constitutes a valuable and measurable area of study distinct from professional or genius-level achievement.

3. Distinction from Eminent Creativity

The primary differentiation between ordinary creativity (Little-c) and eminent creativity (Big-C) rests upon the scope, impact, and domain relevance of the creative output. Big-C creativity involves creating something entirely new that fundamentally alters a cultural domain--such as the creation of the theory of relativity or a groundbreaking artistic movement. This level of creativity is rare, requires years of deliberate practice and expertise (often corresponding to the Pro-c level), and results in products that are universally recognized as innovative and historically significant.

In contrast, ordinary creativity is characterized by its personal and localized impact. While the product of Little-c may be novel to the creator or their immediate social circle, it is not necessarily new to the world. The value of Little-c resides in the process and the immediate utility it provides to the individual. For example, a student finding a unique way to remember complex historical dates exhibits Little-c; the solution is effective and unique for that individual, but it does not advance the domain of history itself. Furthermore, Big-C often requires deep specialization, whereas Little-c relies more on general cognitive ability, flexible thinking, and the willingness to take minor risks in thought or action. Understanding this distinction is vital for educational and organizational contexts, where the goal is often to foster Little-c skills across the board rather than to cultivate Big-C genius in a select few.

4. Developmental Stages

The development of ordinary creativity is a key area within developmental psychology, tracing its origins from early childhood play through complex adult reasoning. As the source content suggests, children generally begin to display pronounced traits of ordinary creativity during the elementary school years. This emergence is closely tied to the development of **abstract thought** and improved executive functioning. Prior to this stage, early childhood creativity is often categorized as Mini-c, manifested through spontaneous, imaginative play and unique ways of understanding the world.

During the elementary phase (roughly ages 6-12), cognitive abilities mature, enabling children to move beyond purely concrete operations. They become capable of generating complex narratives, devising intricate game rules, and applying divergent thinking skills to formal academic problems. Educators play a critical role here, as curriculum design can either foster or inhibit this burgeoning capacity. Environments that encourage questioning, experimentation, and non-traditional solutions tend to accelerate the development of robust Little-c skills. If these skills are nurtured through adolescence, they transition into mature adult creative abilities, integral for career adaptability and civic engagement. Failure to cultivate these skills can result in cognitive rigidity, limiting an individual's ability to cope with ambiguity and change.

5. Key Characteristics

Ordinary creativity is measurable through observable components derived primarily from studies of divergent thinking. These characteristics represent the core mechanisms that enable individuals to "drum up unique and one-of-a-kind ideas."

Fluency: This refers to the sheer number of ideas or solutions an individual can generate in response to a prompt. High fluency indicates a facile access to conceptual resources and a reduced tendency toward premature self-censorship during the brainstorming phase.

Flexibility: This measures the variety of categories or conceptual domains represented by the generated ideas. A highly flexible thinker can shift cognitive sets easily, approaching a problem from multiple angles rather than becoming stuck in one type of solution.

Originality: This is the statistical rarity or uniqueness of an idea relative to a norm group. In Little-c, high originality means the idea is unusual compared to others in the same setting, though it may not be globally unprecedented.

Elaboration: This characteristic assesses the level of detail, complexity, and refinement used to develop or articulate an idea. It reflects the individual's capacity to transition from a nascent concept to a practical, actionable plan or product.

6. Measurement and Assessment

Assessing ordinary creativity generally relies on psychometric tests designed to quantify divergent thinking processes. The most famous and widely utilized instrument for this purpose is the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT). The TTCT presents participants with open-ended tasks, such as asking them to list all the possible uses for a common object (e.g., a paper clip) or to elaborate on an abstract drawing. The responses are then scored based on the key characteristics of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration.

The utility of such tests in measuring Little-c lies in their focus on potential rather than achievement. They gauge the capacity for creative thought irrespective of specialized knowledge

or domain expertise. However, the assessment of ordinary creativity is not without limitations. Critics often point out that testing conditions may not accurately reflect real-world problem-solving, which is often motivated by intrinsic interest and contextual relevance. Furthermore, cultural differences can influence scoring, as what is considered "original" in one cultural context may be commonplace in another, posing challenges for universal standardization. Despite these issues, standardized measures remain critical tools for identifying creative potential in educational settings and for tracking the effectiveness of instructional programs designed to enhance everyday creative capacity.

7. Significance and Impact

The significance of ordinary creativity extends far beyond personal entertainment; it is a critical component of individual well-being, organizational agility, and societal adaptability. On a personal level, the ability to engage in Little-c facilitates better emotional regulation and coping mechanisms, allowing individuals to creatively frame challenges and adapt to unforeseen circumstances. It is fundamentally linked to intrinsic motivation and a sense of personal efficacy.

In educational and professional environments, ordinary creativity is increasingly recognized as a vital skill. Educational institutions aim to cultivate Little-c to ensure students are prepared not just for rote tasks, but for navigating the ill-defined problems characteristic of modern workplaces. In organizations, Little-c drives minor, incremental innovation--the continuous improvements in processes and products that sustain competitiveness, often termed "KAIZEN" in management theory. When employees feel empowered to apply ordinary creativity to their daily tasks, it results in higher engagement, faster turnaround times, and a more dynamic, problem-solving organizational culture. Thus, ordinary creativity functions as the engine for widespread, low-risk experimentation necessary for both individual growth and collective progress.

Further Reading

[Creativity \(General Wikipedia Entry\)](#)

[Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking \(TTCT\)](#)

[Divergent Thinking](#)