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Everyday Creativity as Experienced by Work Counsellors

Abstract

This review deals with everyday creativity, which is considered central to success in current working life. Creativity is also central to the development of research methods, the theme of this issue of *Ethnologia Fennica*. The article examines perceptions of creativity by work counsellors, who are constantly on the lookout for effective methods in their work with clients. Work counsellors' understandings of creativity provide a basis for self-reflexion for researchers' aspirations in developing research methods. How can we provoke and enhance creativity?

Keywords: creativity, everyday creativity, work counselling

Introduction

Ethnology, like all research, requires creativity. Developing methods and new ways of analysis are part of the work of an ethnologist, whether their fieldwork takes place in the archives or amongst people's everyday lives. Though creativity has been discussed in connection to our work in recent years (e.g. Culhane & Elliott 2017; Karjula, Kouri & Mahlamäki 2024), we still have much to learn. Rudimentary changes especially, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Svašek 2023), the posthumanist turn (Hamilton & Taylor 2017) and sensory ethnography (Calvey 2021), have increased the need for finding new solutions. This article contributes to discussions on how best to understand creativity by focusing on the experiences of work counsellors, who use creative methods in their own daily work. As an ethnologist and a qualified work counsellor, I am interested in discovering how the views and experiences of work counsellors could benefit the work of ethnologists.

Work counselling (also known as work supervision) is a method growing in popularity, which aims to increase well-being at work and improve the smoothness and effectiveness of work. Different organisations and individuals buy the services of work counsellors, for example in a change-type situation. In some health and social services sectors, the employer must arrange regular work counselling for the employees. In practice, work counselling is a dialogue or a group discussion facilitated by a work counsellor. Various methods, such as visual stimuli, drawing or building blocks, can be used in work counselling meetings to encourage open-minded thinking. The work counselling process involves meetings lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, for example once a month for several months. (E.g. Hyrkäs & Paunonen-Ilmonen 2008.)

According to the definition of the Finnish Supervisors' Association, work counselling consists of the study, evaluation and development of work. Work counselling is used to simultaneously interpret and structure work-related issues, experiences and emotions (e.g. Roth 2019; STORY webpage 2023). Interpreting, structuring and finding new work-related solutions requires creative thinking. In this article, creativity refers to *everyday creativity*, which enables people to deal with the coincidences, changes and challenges of everyday life (Richards 2007; Runco & Richards 1997). Creativity is a form of thinking and action that combines things in a new way and modifies existing cultural practices (Liep 2001; Rosaldo et al. 2018). Creativity takes place especially in open points, change situations and in-between moments (Rosaldo et al. 2018). It is known as *ordinary creativity* (Ripple 1989), or *everyone, everywhere, everyday creativity* (Montuori & Donnelly 2013).

Today, creativity is often seen as a phenomenon central to working life and as a positive value in general (e.g. Rosaldo et al. 2018; Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). A creative individual is thought to possess deeper knowledge and expertise, more experience and the motivation and desire to develop and use their knowledge (e.g. Boden 2004). It is important for researchers to focus on the topic of creativity because it takes on different meanings over time and is linked to different forms of culture (Ingold 2022; Löfgren 2001; Weiner 2000, 5). Creative people are considered open and flexible and ready to take risks. Freedom, democracy and diversity are thought to feed creativity, and creativity in turn strengthens society. It has been argued that in post-industrial society, the emphasis on creativity has even become a substitute for religion (Weiner 2000, 9).

Various forms of creativity have also been addressed through such sub-concepts as historical and psychological creativity. *Historical creativity* refers to innovations that are new and significant to all of humanity. *Psychological creativity*, on the other hand, is the invention of new things for the individual (Lonka 2014, 202). Creativity occurs in all situations where people must face the new and unpredictable (Sternberg 1988). Work counselling encounters are almost invariably those types of situations. Even if the counsellor is familiar with the client, most likely the client has experienced something new since the last meeting. The combination of different working life situations and the client's and the counsellor's personalities and skills make each counselling meeting a unique encounter.

For this study, I analysed an online survey that I conducted in September 2023 before receiving my work counsellor studies diploma. I asked participants to complete the questionnaire using the University of Helsinki's e-form system and advertised it on social media. I tried to make the survey as short and easy to complete as possible so that the length or difficulty of the survey would not deter busy respondents. With respect to background information, I asked what type of work counselling the respondent was doing at the time and how long they had been working as a work supervisor (0–2 years, 3–9 years or more than ten years). Almost half (9) of the respondents had been working as a counsellor for less than two years. Seven respondents had been working at the job for 3–9 years and four respondents had been doing it for more than ten years. When defining their own work as a counsellor, a few respondents mentioned that they adopt a solution-oriented and resource-oriented approach. Almost everyone was involved in both individual and group counselling. The respondents' clients typically are professionals from many different fields, such as supervisors and those in management positions and

persons in the social and health care sector, education and various organisations in the arts and culture sector.

The survey included five questions on work counselling and creativity:

- What do you think creativity is (and can be) in work counselling?
- What can creativity achieve in the workplace?
- How can work counselling promote and support the creativity of the customer?
- What methods are used to promote creativity in work counselling?
- How can a work counsellor stay creative and increase their own creativity?

Nearly all the respondents answered all the questions, although the invitation to participate had indicated that it was possible to answer only some of the questions. One participant did not write anything in one text box, but they had already answered the question in a previous paragraph. In any case, it was common that several questions were answered in one text field. For reporting purposes, I have picked answers from different text fields based on the content.

Creativity is at the Core of Work Counselling

Defining creativity is not simple (e.g. Parkkola 2020). Therefore, the first question in the questionnaire, how to recognise creativity in work counselling, may have seemed challenging to the respondents. Most of the respondents wrote about different methods that can be used to promote creative thinking in work counselling. When taking a broader perspective than just viewing creativity as a method, respondents defined it as *alternative approaches*, *multidimensional thinking*, *flexibility* in counselling and thinking, and the *occasional flying of thoughts and disconnection from everyday life*. The most often mentioned response was the *discovery of new perspectives* and *thinking in a new way*, which corresponds to the definition of everyday creativity, i.e. the readiness to see every-day phenomena in a new light and to solve everyday challenges (Lonka 2014, 202). In the survey responses, the terms *reflexivity*, *intuition* and *state of ignorance* were also mentioned. Several respondents stated that creativity in work supervision means taking the customers' needs into account spontaneously, at the moment of supervision. One of the respondents pointed out that creativity is especially needed in problem situations. In general, the answers reveal that respondents consider creativity a key part of work counselling, at least from the counsellors' point of view. One respondent, who had been a supervisor for more than ten years, explained what creativity means to them in work counselling:

> It is knowing what to say, how to act in both predictable and unpredictable situations. That you always know how to be.

In some of the responses, creativity is described as a holistic skill or as a personal feature of the counsellor. Some of the respondents indicated that creativity involves using methods that enhance the creativity of the counsellor or the client. In her doctoral thesis, occupational health psychologist Tarja Vanne (2021, 149) emphasises creativity especially at the point in the work counselling process where different options are sought for solving a certain problem. Vanne emphasises that it is important to make use of imagination and to look for as many different options as possible, from which the best ones can be chosen.

The answers to the second question of the survey, what creativity can achieve in working life, reinforce the research results presented in the introduction to this text. It can be concluded that the respondents consider creativity an important issue in general because it helps people achieve different goals in ever-changing working life situations. The survey responses mentioned new innovations and practices most often. In addition, factors related to well-being at work and job retention received more mentions. The respondents' backgrounds as counsellors are reflected in the answers, meaning that the development of new products received only a few mentions. Instead, all the responses tended to highlight the need and opportunities for both individuals and organisations to develop themselves. In keeping with a social climate that emphasises innovation, one of the respondents wrote that creativity can achieve anything and that successful companies and entrepreneurs are creative (for more on the topic, see e.g. Laundry 2014). On the other hand, several responses highlighted aspects related to increasing the meaningfulness of work. They included finding joy in one's work, enthusiasm and the prevention of boredom. In the context of research, the creative development of methods might spark joy and induce passion and feelings of empowerment (Ylijoki et al. 2024). At the same time, resistance can also be understood as a form of creativity, as shown in prior anthropological and ethnological research (Löfgren 2001).

Creativity-Believers and Therapeutic Power

In the changing world of work, creative thinking is needed. Education psychologist Kirsti Lonka (2014, 121) has stated that creative thinking involves combining things that seemingly are not even related. Such analogical reasoning or metaphorical thinking may not be easy for an adult. Work counselling is one way in which creative thinking can be supported and promoted.

The counsellors who responded to the survey saw the effects of creativity in working life as very broad and positive. One of the respondents, who had been a supervisor for several years, provided the following response to the question of what creativity can achieve in working life:

> Good results, positive ways of working together, better atmosphere, new and different, change. Creativity can make the same old look completely new.

It is not surprising that new and innovative solutions to different working life situations are highlighted in the answers. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that enjoying one's job, the retention rate of an organisation and issues related to the general atmosphere of a workplace were also mentioned quite often. If we continue with Weiner's (2000) idea that creativity or some form of "worship" of creativity has perhaps been overemphasised of late, it is possible to take a more critical perspective on this point as well. Some people do not want constant change and the creativity that it requires; rather, they would desire an appropriate number of routines and a sense of familiarity that provides security and thereby strengthens their job satisfaction.

One respondent, who had been serving as a work counsellor for more than ten years, also saw the benefits of creativity in quite broad terms. According to them, creativity can be achieved in working life in the following ways:

> New perspectives, connection to self and others, more positive perspectives, compassion, coping, joy, clarity...

Looking at this answer critically, you might think that it shows not only a creativity-believer attitude but also the hegemony of therapeutic power. A more critical voice would ask why there is a need for positivity in working life, or a need to connect on a deeper level with oneself and others. Is it not enough to get the job done and have free time that is your own? The problem with so-called therapeutic power is that there are many structural issues in the world of work that are difficult, slow or even impossible to influence. Yet, workplaces tend to emphasise fixing such systemic problems (e.g. Fox et al. 2024) at the individual level through, for example, therapy, work counselling or coaching (Brunila et al. 2021). Should work counselling seek to force clients to spin those types of negative experiences in a positive manner, for example by emphasising creativity? Structural problems would still remain and exist in the background, but the "fault" would instead be transferred to the individual, who does not know how to be sufficiently creative or adequately practice the (self-)compassion mentioned in the above quote.

Better work engagement is often an implicit aspiration in working life-related creativity talk. Even though work engagement is being promoted as contributing to a positive state of mind, it should be scrutinised more closely since the line between positive work engagement and excessive workload may become blurred and difficult to spot (e.g. Hakanen 2011). Another perspective is that work engagement, relaxation and a good attitude are needed at work in order to find creative solutions and get the job done (e.g. Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018).

For example, according to Goleman (1999), good humour increases creativity. Vanne (2021) even states that today, experts work and succeed largely based on creative thinking. According to her, innovation and creativity are based on well-functioning interpersonal relationships between individuals. Therefore, the appropriate state of alertness of an individual is not a sufficient pre-condition for creative thinking. Psychological safety, time and space for experimentation, humour and play are also needed so that the fear of failure does not restrain a person's thinking (e.g. Lonka 2014). Connections between community and creativity also emerged in the survey responses. In addition to the term communality, the same topic was also addressed by highlighting the need for mutual understanding, positive encounters and team spirit, connection with colleagues, better interactions, high-quality customer work and compassion.

It has become a common cliché to view a creative person as a singular misunderstood genius fighting against the world (e.g. Robinson 2011). Lonka (2014) has stated that going against the flow is often what creative individuals do, since creativity can mean being a forerunner, with the general environment not always offering others an easy way to understand such creativity. Interestingly, nowadays there is no great difference between network intelligence, i.e. interactive knowledge production, and creativity (e.g. Lonka 2014, 112). Emphasising the communal nature of creativity can even be an emancipatory and liberating idea because highlighting only the genius of certain individuals mystifies the creative thinking process (e.g. Boden 2004) and places unnecessary pressure on the shoulders of the individual.

One new work counsellor who responded to the survey (who had been acting as a supervisor for 0–2 years) viewed creativity rather broadly as a positive factor in working life:

> Creativity can bring new innovations to working life on many levels. It can produce new ways of operating and organising work and work communities. In this way, it can enable the renewal and development of work roles in the organisation and the tweaking of work to adapt it better to the individual/community. Consequently, it also strengthens well-being at work and "produces" better performing and more committed employees for the organisation. As a chain reaction, work becomes productive and profitable. The development of new services/products is also made possible through creativity. Creativity can also enhance employee interaction. It opens new perspectives on both oneself and others and deepens understanding of other people. Creativity is also an inexhaustible source of continuous learning at work.

Some kind of meta-level benefit is evident in the ideas of one counsellor, who responded that creative methods can be used to increase the client's self-understanding both at work and in other areas of life.

Communal Dimensions of Everyday Creativity

Most of the respondents perceived creativity above all as finding new solutions for doing various types of work tasks more efficiently, developing new products, marketing materials or the like, or otherwise as a matter related to the substances of the work itself. However, one respondent highlighted the importance of creativity in the development of social relationships in the workplace. According to them, one can be encouraged by creative means to put oneself in the position of a colleague or a manager, which enables the work counselling participant to view the activities of the work community or, more broadly, the organisation from the point of view of others. According to the respondent, this may have profound significance for the client:

> At best, such an exercise supports the professional identity of the client and also helps them to examine the perspectives or tasks of their co-workers in the work community.

According to Vanne (2021, 44), it is possible to create a "dynamic drive" for renewal and cooperation between the group members. However, in this kind of thinking, it is worthwhile to ensure that the atmosphere remains safe for all members of the group, including those in a minority position. Workplace situations requiring creativity may be a real test of workplace inclusion. Will everyone be able to participate in creative processes genuinely as themselves and from their own starting points?

One respondent, a person who had been working as a supervisor for several years, did not list the methods used in work counselling, but instead emphasised permissiveness as a thought pattern and method in itself.

> In every method, I see the opportunity to promote creativity – it's more about what is allowed than what is actually done. Permissiveness is probably the best method; creativity must not be stifled, but both the client and the work counsellor must be allowed to act in a variety of ways. Creativity is also fostered by leaving one's comfort zone, having the courage to do and experience something new.

From a theoretical standpoint, the connection between leaving one's comfort zone and creativity can be perceived, for example, as evidence of high levels of well-being at work, thus enabling the sense of a positive atmosphere and facilitating work engagement. Add to this mix a relaxed collective working space and permissiveness, and it becomes easier to reach the zone of proximal development, where one experiences a constant state of newness and an insecure working life (on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximate Development, see Lonka 2014). Philosopher Frank Martela (2009) has considered the zone of proximate development and the sense of community in a way that, according to my interpreta-

tion, also includes creativity. Lonka (2014, 196) has also highlighted the social nature of creativity. She has stated that different social and cultural processes affect human growth, development and creative work. Creativity is thus linked to the historical and social environment in which a person lives and thinks. In addition to Vygotsky, Lonka refers to creativity researcher Vera John-Steiner. John-Steiner (2006) has studied the collaborative creativity of artists and scientists who have worked in pairs or small groups. However, she stresses that *co-creation* can also be an everyday phenomenon accessible to anyone.

Summary

The work counsellors who responded to the survey understood creativity quite broadly, although some stressed the art-based methods often used in the work counselling process. The broad understanding of creativity and focus on everyday creativity might be an important insight for researchers in the humanities and cultural studies since our creativity seldom leads to revolutionary, historical innovations. According to previous research, creative thinking means using one's imagination, generating ideas, experimenting with different alternatives and evaluating both one's own and peer-to-peer ideas, outputs and processes (Lonka 2014, 217). Increasing the meaningfulness of work was one of the respondents' perspectives on creativity, which is linked to the idea that the outcome of the creative activity is not as important as the success of the process (Lonka 2014, 217). A successful process will support and increase the participants' agency in the future. There is still much to explore in terms of agency and creativity, but some interesting results have already been achieved. Experts working in the IT field have outlined the issue so that, on the one hand, agency is a prerequisite for creativity, while at the same time agency is the result of creativity. In addition, creativity and professional agency can be understood as synonymous (Collin et al. 2017). Such a holistic and all-encompassing approach to creativity may pose a challenge for future research. How can researchers break down and conceptualise a creative process that is difficult to verbalise and document? I believe ethnology, with its focus on everyday mundane phenomena, has a great deal to offer in the field of studying everyday creativity.

Creativity is the result of learning (Collin et al. 2017). This perspective was fundamental to the work counsellors' survey responses, which emphasised permissiveness as well as experimenting with various creative methods. Indeed, the creative process involves much tolerance for uncertainty (Collin et al. 2017), even as a research process. In the responses of the work counsellors, this belief was reflected in their own terminology, which included *intuition* and *state of ignorance*. The role of a work counsellor requires throwing oneself into a situation without any certainty of success. As for uncertainty, it is stressful (e.g. Nummenmaa 2019, 243). The connection between everyday creativity and

stress is an important area of study and reflects the situation in a wide range of workplaces and professions, including research. On a practical level, it is important to recognise creativity as a collaborative process, one that includes permissive and encouraging attitudes towards colleagues as an enabler of creativity.

To conclude, I would encourage us ethnologists to treat creativity more as a shared rather than an individual process. Different forms of collaboration and co-creation are already deeply rooted in our methods. As stated in previous research, our research material is not collected but *created* in communication and collaboration with the world (e.g. Davies 2008). Focusing our ethnological gaze on creativity would be beneficial for developing our methodologies and research processes from planning to publishing and the dissemination of our results. Our understanding of cultural factors, such as the norms, values and meaning-making processes embedded in creativity, has the potential to unlock and enhance culturally diverse teams' innovative aspirations.

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