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Creative rationality in the work of managers – A framework

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Abstract

Creativity in organizations is a social phenomenon rather than an individual one, significantly impacting managers. To enable their organization to work creatively, managers must rationalize creativity in collaboration with peers, employees, and other stakeholders. For creative performance to be recognized as rational, it must align with the organization's purpose. Although various research disciplines have examined these processes, no model exists for creative rationality in organizations. Based on research on creativity, social distance, and rationality, we propose a framework for creative and rational work by managers in organizations.

Introduction

Creativity is a key basic condition for innovation in organizations, thus a driving topic for responsible managers (Klijn & Tomic, 2010). To understand and foster creativity, managers have to understand the rationale that guides creative behavior in organizations. Economic organization theory is based on rational choice theories that assume that rationality is an individual utility maximization phenomenon (Zey, 2015) which implies that managers shall design organizations that include incentives for innovation. However, the individualistic approach has recently been challenged: In particular, its exclusion of social interaction is considered inaccurate by scholars (Hatchuel, 2002; Porac & Tschang, 2013). Instead of being "single, isolated" (Simon, 1947: 79), authors argue that managers are involved in social interactions that not only improve their rationality, but even create it, as rationality in organizations is a social construction (Cabantous et al., 2010).

We share this position and believe that the importance of social interaction in creative work has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged. We will argue that as managing social interactions is key to organizational decision making (Selart & Patokorpi, 2008), it is in the heart of a manager's ability to foster creativity and innovation. As a result of major social, economic and technological upheavals, managers need to have creativity furthering skills in order for organizations to survive (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Patvardhan & Ramachandran, 2000; Williams & Yang, 1998). Creativity in organizations requires collaboration and social interaction (Fischer et al., 2005; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). However, there is little knowledge about creative work in organizations and even less about the role of managers in furthering organizational creativity. We therefore propose a framework of managerial foci that

are relevant for creative collaboration. We borrow from research on social and cognitive distance (Karakayali, 2009; Nooteboom, 2000), creativity (George, 2007; Klijn & Tomic, 2010) and multiple rationalities in organizations (Cabantous et al., 2009; Diesing, 1962; Schedler & Rüegg-Stürm, 2014). We show that optimal social and cognitive distance between actors are essential components of successful collaboration and find that creative rationality in organizations is both a value in itself and can serve as a means to an economic outcome.

This conceptual paper is structured as follows: First, we posit that creativity is primarily a social rather than an individual phenomenon and, as such, requires optimal social distance. We next show that creativity is a cognitive phenomenon and therefore also needs balanced cognitive distance. We then explain why we view creativity as rationality that arises in the social exchange of actors. We follow that creativity can be either exclusively creatively rational or also economically rational. We summarise these considerations in our framework, which we discuss before suggesting further research avenues.

Creativity as a Social Phenomenon

Creativity in organizations has been a hot topic both for practice and research. A fundamental contribution to creativity comes from Fischer et al, (2005) who describe creativity as consisting of four elements: Originality, expression, social evaluation and social appreciation within a community. Originality either emerges from new ideas or from applying existing ideas to new settings. Expression means that new solutions need to be formulated, to be shared as they are useless as long as they only exist as ideas in one's mind. Subsequently, they can get evaluated by others. Amabile (2006) includes expertise, creative thinking skills, and motivation into the requirements for creativity. In addition, it involves imagination and problem solving (Sundberg, 1959).

In a literature review on creativity in organizations, George (2007) shows that existing studies primarily address individual creativity. Group creativity, on the other hand, tends to be under-examined. She comes to the conclusion that it is impressive how much we still do not know about the creativity of long-term collaborative groups in organizations. One exception is the model by Woodman et al., which is made up of the three levels of individual creativity, group creativity and organizational creativity and shows the interdependencies between the levels (1993). However, the model is limited to creativity as the production of 'valuable, useful new product, service, idea, procedure or process' (Woodman et al., 1993: 293). We pursue a more

elaborate definition of creativity, which is why we propose our own model. Borghini's (2005) framework, on the other hand, ignores the role of the team in the creative process. However, Fischer et al. (2005) found that a group's ability to solve challenging problems was considerably higher than an individual's. Thus, they use the term *social creativity* that goes back to Tajfel and Turner (2004). Considering that creative work in general, but most often in organizations, is based on collaboration, concepts of social interaction should be helpful to explain social creativity. This is one of the reasons why we are particularly interested in the social processes in groups that influence the extent of creativity in this article. A central element of social interaction is social distance. We will look at this in more detail in the next section.

Social Distance

The level of social distance has been found to impact the creative potential of an organization. Ziebro and Northcraft (2009) found that exchanges among group members who are deep-level similar fosters incremental creative potential while information exchanges among group members who are deep-level dissimilar fosters radical creative potential.

The concept of social distance originates from Simmel's 1908 text "Space and the Spatial Orders of Society" (1983). In today's understanding, social space between humans can be physical or cultural, it includes "the extent to which people experience a sense of familiarity (nearness and intimacy) or unfamiliarity (farness and difference) between themselves and people belonging to different social, ethnic, occupational, and religious groups from their own" (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2014). We define it according to Magee and Smith (2013: 159) as "a subjective perception or experience form of another person or persons". Simmel explains that social interactions are both embedded in outer and inner space in parallel, not necessarily in a synchronised manner: Thus, inner closeness is possible despite external distance (Simmel, 1983: 482). Simmel then even goes one step further emphasizing that distance can also be constitutive of closeness, as is shown by the example of friendship: "There are probably very few relationships of friendship which do not interweave some kind of distancing into their closeness" (1983: 483). The right balance between proximity and distance is crucial for collaboration: "In the distant relationship understanding is lost; in the close relationship the professional loses his objectivity" (Kadushin, 1962).

Park supplements the two spaces with four dimensions of (inner) distance - affective, normative, interactive and cultural and personal distance (1923). Affective distance is reflected in Bogardus' (1947) scale and is understood as the distance that people feel between themselves and is therefore purely subjective (Karakayali, 2009). However, as Karakayali correctly concludes, the concept of affective distance already shows that it cannot be the only dimension of social distance: By asking participants for their judgements of who belongs to their group and who does not, Bogardus' scale presupposes a "collective understanding" of group membership that goes beyond mutual sympathy (Karakayali, 2009: 541). It therefore implies an objective basis for social distance. Karakayali suggests normative distance as a second dimension of social distance. It is based on "collectively recognized norms about membership status in a group" (Karakayali, 2009: 541). The norms determine membership of social systems in different degrees and thus structure collaboration (Karakayali, 2009). Norms are supra-individual, but must be subjectively reflected at the actor level. If norms contradict subjective feelings of belonging, either norms or groups will lose their very existence (Karakayali, 2009). Interactive distance results from frequency and intensity of people's interaction and builds on Granovetter's work "The strength of weak ties" (1973). Interactive distance results both from factual interaction as well as from the other dimensions of social distance, whereby it can in turn influence the other dimensions of social distance. Cultural/habitual distance goes back to Bourdieu's work on social space (1996). It presumes that social distance is determined by the type and amount of capital held by actors and their social status (Karakayali, 2009). People of similar social status are thus closer to each other than people of different status, from whom they distance themselves (Bourdieu, 1996).

In general, scholars tend to conceptualize the dimensions of social distance over time as a linear model by transferring distances of one dimension to other dimensions (Kadushin, 1962). However, there is no convincing reason to do so. In fact, Karakayali uses the juxtaposition of normative and affective distance to show that an affective closeness can develop between groups with normative distance that would not be possible between groups without normative distance (2006). For example, close relationships between foreigners and the ruling elites of a society are possible, as shown by the example of Swiss mercenaries who served French kings (Karakayali, 2009).

Based on Simmel, according to whom the inner and outer space interact, we follow López (2021) and Karakayali (2009) who suggest that this also applies to the dimensions: while the normative dimension must be reflected on a subjective level, for example in the affective dimension, in order to retain its validity, the interactive dimension acts without the

involvement of other dimensions. In contrast, the cultural dimension influences the interactive and, possibly, the affective dimension, but does not control it completely, as Bourdieu's work on social capital demonstrates (1996).

Together, these dimensions structure creative work in organizations. We presume that people react to a distance that is too small for them in one dimension by increasing their distance in another dimension: For example, by giving up a friendship or reducing the time they spend on an interaction in order to improve a professional relationship and its outputs. However, creative work in organizations is not only a social phenomenon, but also a cognitive one. It is therefore strongly influenced by cognitive distance. This will be discussed in the next section.

Cognitive Distance

In order to better understand the creativity of social groups, it is valuable to analyse the shared cognitive processes in the group. The question is not only how unorthodox ideas are generated, but also whether and how they are communicated and evaluated within the group. In the best case, the idea meets with 'reflective reframing' (Hardagon & Bechky, 2006) within the group, a practice that respectfully exchanges comments and actions among members. While a balance between social closeness or distance is important for creativity at the relationship level, the same applies to the factual level.

The term "cognitive distance" has been used in a variety of concepts, ranging from the assigned degree of difference between words in a text (Dopkins & Sargent, 2008) to references on spacial distances (Montello, 1991). In this paper we use the concept as a measure of similarity in thinking, which, according to Nooteboom (2000), has an influence on creativity in groups.

The prerequisites for creative work in groups are, first, cognitive skills, motivation and personality traits (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Second, research has found that a wide variety of backgrounds is helpful in exploring new solutions or applying existing solutions to new situations (Nooteboom, 2000) and introduced the term 'cognitive distance' (Nooteboom, 2000: 72). It means "difference in cognitive function" including differences in the phenomena to make sense of (domain), the way to make sense of information (Nooteboom, 2000: 72). However, cognitive distance should not be too large so that communication between actors is still possible (Nooteboom, 2000). Third, Dörfler and Eden (2019) show that proximity in

laboratories or personal proximity helps Nobel laureates to advance into new areas. Creativity thus seems to work best in a middle range of distance of actors.

Diversity in groups is therefore conducive to creativity. However, George (2007) clearly emphasizes that diversity does not refer to the usual gender or ethnic criteria, but to different professional backgrounds, professional experience or training. It is precisely these differences that make up the cognitive distance that can be controlled by managers through conscious group formation. When people interact with each other, they construct and re-construct a rationality that informs their meaning making and thus the creation of a shared reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1995; Cabantous et al., 2009). As we will discuss in the next section, we consider creativity to be a form of rationality.

Rationality

George (2007) emphasizes that creativity is encouraged when it is expected in an organizational setting, by superiors or by the social group - in other words: if creative behavior is considered to be rational.

Rationality has been described as a social construction in decision making (Cabantous et al., 2009). It found its expression in Taylor's management theory, shaped Weber's theory of bureaucracy, inspired Fayol's administrative systems and Simon's management behavior (Townley, 2008). In management, guided by economists, rationality has often been reduced to a purely economic rational-choice perspective. For example, Simon introduced the concept of bounded rationality as he found that decisions in organizations usually don't fulfil the requirements of a pure economically rational process (Simon, 1959). Later, his rational-choice-informed concept of (bounded) rationality has been widely discussed and criticized by scholars.

A major point of criticism is Simon's reduction of the analysis to the individual, which does not correspond to the real work situation of managers. Instead, social interactions are an essential feature of a managers' work situation in organizations (Hatchuel, 2001). We follow Cabantous et al. (2010) in considering rationality as a result of social interaction. This implies that there is a social group that by interacting constructs and constantly re-constructs its shared rationality (similar: Berger & Luckmann, 1995). Actors within this social group are confirming and receiving confirmation by others that specific actions, arguments, or interpretations of information are rational (Schedler & Rüeegg-Stürm, 2014). Through this

ongoing process, a rationality becomes a guiding principle for this specific social group. Or as Diesing puts it: It is “a special kind of order, which is intelligible due to the presence of a governing principle” (Diesing, 1962: 239).

In practice, decisions are often simplistically ascribed ideal-typical rationalities. An economically rational decision, for example, weighs up the costs and benefits of different options and opts for the one with the best cost-benefit ratio from the decision-maker's perspective (Teixeira et al., 2020). A decision that is based on power considerations and influenced by power relations is considered to be politically rational (Thurmaier & Willoughby, 2001). This is in line with ideal-typical settings that have been used as a point of reference for sociological studies, such as by Thornton and Ocasio (2008) or Luhmann (1995). Simplification may be helpful as a heuristic, but it does not correspond with the complexity of social systems such as an organization, and even less with the self-organizing leeway of a social group. Thus, as we will later use the term ‘creative rationality’, we are fully aware that this is a simplification that we apply to point to fundamental differences between creative and economic rationality. We will argue that creativity may have a meaning in itself, without a direct economic benefit, and that this is considered rational by some social groups in an organization.

This relates to Max Weber's distinction between value rationality (*Wertrationalität*) and instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*): Actions are value rational if they are “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success” (Weber, 2013: 24).

Instrumentally rational actions, on the other hand, are “determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actors’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends” (Weber, 2013: 24). By introducing this differentiation to the analysis of creative rationality, it becomes clear that creative action in organizations is not necessarily instrumental.

Creative Rationality

In recent times, creative rationality in organizations has been addressed alongside the ‘classic’ rationalities we discussed above (Dubois, 2021; Forest, 2009), although not extensively. The governing principle of creative rationality is more difficult to capture than economic

rationality. The focus is on the assumption that creativity in itself is a form of behavior that is recognized as rational in a social group. As such, creative rationality is mainly concerned with creating something new (Fischer et al., 2005). A procedural expression of creatively rational action lies in non-rule-based, playful experimentation and tinkering (Klijn & Tomic, 2010), or as Dubois (2021) puts it: creative rationality is both reactive and projective, it is opportunistic, and it is visionary. Decisions are deemed creatively rational if they focus on difference, on the lust of opening new ways and perspectives to an organization, no matter what their use may be. Creativity differs from innovation in that it does not have to be marketable in a direct sense (Pervaiz, 1998) – even if some creative artists may be very successful in the art market.

To be creative can be both: a means in itself (Weber's *Wertrationalität*) or a means to an end (Weber's *Zweckrationalität*). Purposeful creativity in an organization follows the dominant logic of the corporation, driven by market success and financial returns (Thornton et al., 2012). From this perspective, to be considered rational, creativity has to lead to innovation. In contrast, if creativity does not have a business purpose, we consider it creatively rational.

Creatively Rational Creativity

At first glance, in an organization it seems irrational to promote creativity that does not directly lead to innovation. Why should precious money be invested in a creative activity if no return on investment is to be expected? Nevertheless, there are organizations that consciously create spaces for creativity without an economic purpose. In these spaces, social groups can develop a creative rationality that considers solutions to be rational, even if they do not directly serve the business purpose of the company.

However, the question arises as to whether this is a 'safe space', which in turn makes a contribution to the company at a higher level. For example, can it be expected that the innovative capacity of the organization will be increased if a group of creative people can live out their creative rationality? Does the creative rationality of this group have a positive influence on the corporate culture? Even if we are not yet able to provide answers to these questions, it seems necessary to us, at least for conceptual clarity, to also to capture creativity in organizations that do not directly pursue economic purposes, but rather "in the value for its own sake" according to Weber value rational (2013: 24). We introduce the term 'creatively rational creativity' for this type of creativity in organizations.

Economically Rational Creativity

The goal of creative efforts in organizations is to ensure the success of the organization in changing environments (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Creative output in organizations must be aligned with the overarching goals of the organization. This entails the risk that organizations will not open up to innovation and instead stick to the familiar. Patvardhan and Ramachandran propose "imagining an alternate present" to create the organization's willingness to innovate (2020: 677). Further, they outline the relevance of management communicating its ideas in an emotionally compelling way (Patvardhan & Ramachandran, 2020). Additionally, we consider articulating convincing business plans to be a worthwhile element when dealing with innovation (Delmar & Shane, 2003). From the perspective of rationality, this can be seen as a combination of creative and economic rationality. Thus, from an organizational perspective, creativity is rational if it is also useful for the organization. Creativity then does not serve itself, but another, economic purpose. With Weber, we categorise this type of creativity as instrumentally rational (2013: 24) and propose the term 'economically rational creativity'.

This is achieved, for example, through dialectical exchange with people from different backgrounds (Rindova & Martins, 2021). Research conceptualizes this alignment as feedback loops (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). These loops can also be described as a measure to reduce the uncertainty of creative work and can thus be referred to as "creative synthesis" (Rindova & Martins, 2021: 810).

Our Framework: Creative Work of Managers

Creative work of managers in organizations takes place in a multi-layered environment. First of all, collaboration with other members of the organization is necessary. Collaboration, like any social interaction, is essentially characterized by social distance (Lee & Tiedens, 2001). Thus, creativity is influenced by social distance. However, this is not a stable condition, as the dimensions of social distance interact with each other. It will therefore be a matter of balancing them in order to create optimal conditions for collaboration. Taking social distance into account is even more important because creative work in teams is essentially based on cognitive distance (Fischer et al., 2005; Nooteboom, 2000). It needs to be investigated to what extent cognitive distance interacts with social distance. It is important to strictly separate them conceptually. First of all, they differ in terms of their genesis. Social distance results from the feeling of closeness of actors, be it affectively or normatively, interactionally or culturally.

Cognitive distance, on the other hand, results from people's cognitive abilities, education and professional experience. It follows that social distance is variable: Actors could increase their individual distance by distancing themselves from each other in order to improve their collaboration. Thus, actors can consciously control social distance – at least partially.

Cognitive distance, on the other hand, is largely fixed within a given group. Changes would require additional training or professional experience, which is conceivable but would take a long time to implement. Thus, instead of team members, the manager can control the cognitive distance in teams by putting together and balancing teams of people with different expertise. Furthermore, cognitive distance cannot be compensated for: if it is not present, creative work is made significantly more difficult.

Generally, only those creative activities that are considered useful for the organisation because they promote innovation are perceived as rational. However, we believe that creative-rational creativity is also valuable for organisations: even if it is originally exercised without the intention of innovation, it can lead to innovation in the long term - simply because creatively talented employees are more likely to want to work in organisations where they can be creative. We also suspect that this creativity has an impact on the culture of the organisation. We therefore believe that non-economic creative performance is also of value to organisations. We therefore integrate creative-rational creativity into our model, which we distinguish from economic-rational creativity. The impact of creative-rational creativity is also very likely to be economic in the longer term. We therefore believe that it makes sense for management - for economic reasons - to create 'safe spaces' of creativity that only function creatively rationally.

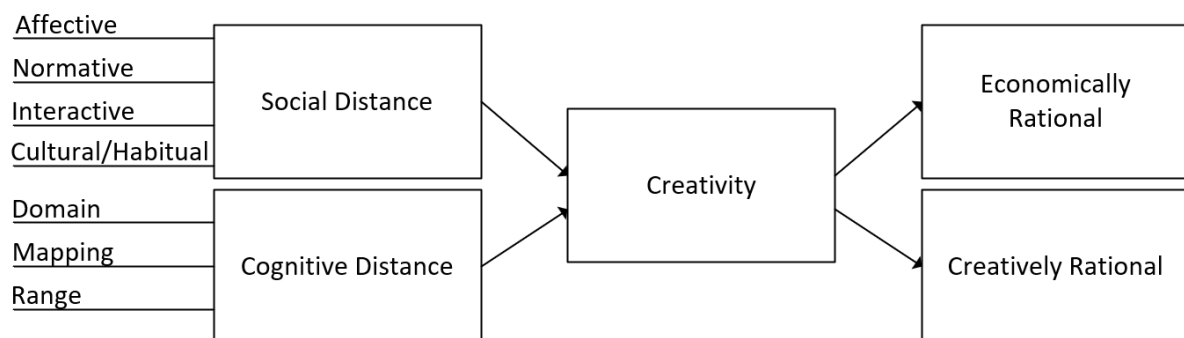


Fig. 1: Framework of Creative Work of Managers.

Discussion

Our framework consists of five elements. It builds on the social distance literature, which identifies social distance as an essential condition for collaboration (Karakayali, 2009; Lee & Tiedens, 2001; Lopez, 2021; Park, 1923;). It also builds on creativity research, which regards cognitive distance as an essential condition for creative work (Nooteboom, 2000). Thirdly, it draws on research on rationalities to assess creative outputs (Cabantous et al., 2010; Diesing, 1962; Weber, 2013).

We still do not know much about the creativity of groups in organizations, although Hargadon & Bechky (2006) and Fischer et al. (2005) show that creativity is a social matter (George, 2007). Social settings are subject to the conditions of social distance (Karakayali, 2009; Park, 1923). This is why our model integrates considerations of cognitive distance and social distance. Managers must navigate this field of tension when composing their teams and create optimal combinations. We follow Karakayali (2009), according to whom the dimensions of social distance influence each other. It follows that they are subject to temporal variance. This could also explain Kljin & Tomic's indication that different studies evaluate the influence of friendships on creative group processes differently (2010).

In contrast to other contributions, for example by Fischer et al. (2005), our model does not give a central role to the social appreciation of creative work. According to them, social appreciation is the last essential step in organizational creativity that can trigger future creative activities. The approaches of Rindova & Martins (2021) and William & Yang (1998) point in a similar direction, whose models provide for feedback loops with other stakeholders to align creative results with the goals of the organization and bring about a selection of creative achievements. We do not locate these selection mechanisms in creative work, but in its realisation to innovation, and also assign a central role to creatively rational creativity.

Our suggestion that organizations should foster creatively rational creativity goes in line with the findings of Perkmann et al. (2018). In their study, they identify two mechanisms - support and anchoring - that contribute to creating "safe spaces" for the work of researchers in scientific collaborations between private-sector companies and scientists and to keeping these collaborations productive in the long term (2018). Schedler and Rüegg-Stürm describe this approach as the 'establishment of decentralized subsystems with their own individual rationalities' (2014: 182).

The creation of creative-rational creativity "safe spaces" can also help to solve the problem identified by Borghini, according to which creativity leads to the codification of knowledge, which promotes rigidity (2005): Creativity would lead to a constant flow of know-how and prevent rigidity.

Results

Rationality in organizations has been examined extensively. In the face of new challenges, the question arises as to how managers can be creative. In our framework, we argue that creativity takes place in the field of tension between social and cognitive distance. The dimensions of social distance influence each other and can be controlled by actors. Cognitive distance, however, cannot be consciously controlled by actors, but must be balanced by managers on a team level. Creativity can be either economically rational or creatively rational. In the short term, a company is primarily interested in promoting economically rational creativity, as this is likely to foster innovation. However, we show that creatively rational creativity can also bring about innovation in the longer term and can positively impact the corporate culture. We therefore suggest that managers should create 'safe spaces' for creatively rational creativity.

Further Research

In our framework, we combine literature from three research strands: social distance, creativity and rationality. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to examine the conceptual difference between social distance and the much-researched strand of diversity. While we consider social distance to be a broader concept than diversity because it also encompasses affective and interactional distance, it appears beneficial to further conceptualize this differentiation.

We herewith propose a conceptual framework that has yet to be empirically tested, which we consider a worthwhile next step. If we presume that the dimensions of social distance influence each other, it should be possible to prove this using a longitudinal study. Such a study would be a logical next research project. The last point has a similar direction. We are aware that social distance with the exception of Bogardus' scale for measuring affective distance as well as cognitive distance are mere cognitive quantities. Hence, measuring the differences would be another fruitful path for further research.

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