TALENTS AGAINST ALL ODDS.

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ABSTRACT: A mythical view of creativity which still prevails leads us to appreciate paintings produced by talented people with mental retardation within the context of an art for “outsiders” and arises a series of theoretical explanations that reinforce the belief that “idiot savants” can not be considered creative. However, “idiot savants” may be considered creative. Two research studies carried out in Portugal showed no significant differences between the evaluations of creative products painted by mentally retarded and renown artists in the answers of 358 psychologists and teachers of arts, economy, humanities and sciences to a specially designed questionnarie. These results are discussed as well as the factors that contribute to the development of artistic talents against all odds.

KEY WORDS: creativity – diversity – intelligence – mental retardation – talent

RESUMEN

Una opinión mística de la creatividad que todavía prevalece nos conduce a apreciar pinturas producidas por gente talentosa con retraso mental dentro del contexto de un arte para “forasteros” y surge una serie de explicaciones teóricas que refuerzan la creencia que los “sabios idiotas” no pueden ser considerados creativos. Sin embargo, “los sabios idiotas” pueden considerarse creativos. Dos investigaciones llevadas a cabo en Portugal muestran diferencias no significativas entre las evaluaciones de productos creativos pintados por retrasados mentales y artistas de renombre en las respuestas de 358 psicólogos y profesores de arte, economía, humanidades y ciencias en un cuestionario especialmente diseñado. Estos resultados se discuten así como los factores que contribuyen al desarrollo de los talentos artísticos en contra de todos los pronósticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: creatividad, diversidad, inteligencia, retraso mental, talento

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the myth even the most famous musician of the ancient world spent a long time learning and practicing the lyre to reach such perfection that the sound of his music had the power to enchant wild beasts, coax the trees and rocks into dance, and even arrest the course of rivers. Possibly made by Hermes out of a turtle shell, Apollo gave Orpheus his lyre. Linus taught him how to play. Orpheus practiced to perfection, and became the inventor of melody and rhythm, the chief poets and musicians, of antiquity, one of the pioneers of civilization, and is said to have taught mankind the arts of music, medicine, writing and agriculture. Orpheus had many devotees, including Pythagoras who influenced Greek philosopher, Plato, who is often accused of having mystified the concept of creativity. Symbol of the arts of song, subject of rites and religions, artistic schools and movements, playwrights and films, operas and cantatas, Orpheus will always be associated to the creative act and experience. Nevertheless only part of the myth is still retained, namely, when Orpheus is associated to the concept of a quasi-magical perfection. That may be why the mythical approach to creativity still remains in spite of the light shed by research results. Creativity and perfection may also be intertwined because many members of society have difficulty in considering that those who do not fulfill the dominant patterns of perfection, especially intellectually, are incapable of producing a creative product, be it an orchestrations of notes, or body movements, or of colour or forms.

(In)consistent views of intelligence, creativity and talent

Contrasting with the Orphic and Dionysian approach to knowledge is the rational Apollonian approach which has firmly defended the perpetuation of the bias that creativity is a process only “the intelligent” may engage in. Some educational, social and research circles deny the possibility of intelligent or creative behaviours in people considered less intelligent. Art and madness are often considered related and idiot savants are seen as functioning at a minimal level of abstract reasoning because they rely almost exclusively on concrete patterns of expression and thought (e.g. Scheerer, Rothmann & Goldstein, 1945; Treffert, 1989) and an immediate and intuitive access to the structural rules underlying that specific knowledge domain (O'Connor & Hermelin, 1987) which makes them incapable of being creative and thus unable to produce a totally original work (e.g. Treffert, 1989). Yet, there is no single definition of art and all forms of expression may be considered of artistic value, mainly because, as Tolstoy advanced art is one of the conditions of human life,
and is not confined to its creation but also to its recreation, that also presupposes skill, will and thrill. Moreover, creativity is said to be indefinable and creative processes and products difficult and complex to evaluate.

This premise is partially based on an oversimplification of some psychological concepts. In name of the “passion for abstraction” (Kagan, 1998), human complexity has been reduced to a fraction of isolated dimensions, such as intelligence, through which individual differences in terms of social adaptation, professional performance and access to educational and cultural opportunities have been justified. Concurrently, the dichotomy “ones” and “others” (Banks, 1993) perpetuates the counterproductive egalitarian fiction (Gottfredson, 1994) where hierarchies of intelligences support the idea that who has “less” is “inferior”. The dominant theoretical concerns and research practices have blinded some important contributions concerning the relativity of such rooted concepts, as are the cases of Vygostky and Zinchenko who legated the idea that the more “basic” or “primary” forms of learning should not be reduced to conditioning, once they reveal intelligence and intentionality (Engeström, 1987), in the same way that the “superior” forms of learning should not be confused with higher types of reasoning. Nonetheless, considering levels of intelligence or production “primitive” or “primary” is equivalent to a limited understanding of the sense of the terms. Etymologically, prime means fundamental, superior (not elementary) and principal (not initial).

Yet, some people have difficulty in assuming that the “less” intelligent may produce “higher” forms of creation. The social and educational system presupposes that intelligence is the exclusive determinant of success and tends to forget all the other human qualities that intervene in human production, such as perseverance, obsession, organization and less frequent forms of expression. That may be the reason underlying the assumption that some of talents as “idiot savants”.

Although intelligence is assumed as a determinant of adaptation and autonomy because someone with a limited IQ is not independent, independence and autonomy are not synonyms. Dependent people may still experience autonomy because autonomy as feeling of freedom of choice seems to be universal (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan, 2003) and leads to adjustment, adaptation and feelings of competency, and therefore self-determination. Furthermore, as Fischer & Tangney (1995) point out, emotions play a basic and adaptive part in human functioning, and intelligent people may experience less adaptive behaviours if they are not
emotionally stable. Hitherto, as Horn (1991) points out, an unequivocal definition of intellectual capabilities is doomed to failure due to the complexity of processes with boundaries beyond comprehension.

Structural and functional views of intelligence have given way to more rich and complex frameworks that take into account qualitative procedural dimensions such as connectivity and complex organization, as well as the combined action of complex cognitive strategies (e.g. Castelló, 1994) where creativity gains importance. Feldman’s (1980) universal "transformational imperative" is identical the process Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the organizing capacity that functions as a means of personal and cultural development and well being.

Fortunately, with or without justifications for retardation and talent, professionals tend to be action-focused because they ultimately care about how well individuals cope with their lives, and seek more effective means to maximize their potential (Robinson, Zigler & Gallagher, 2000).

According to Gagné (1999), the expression of specific talents in a certain domain depends on the personal gift and of two sets of catalysts, one at a personal level, and another at an environmental level. Personal catalysts include technical skills and psychological dimensions, related to motivation, volition and personality. Environmental catalysts include mentors and learning experiences. Consequently, an important catalyst may be an educational context within a climate that promotes autonomy and reinforces competence, both universal needs that must be satisfied for psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the artistic domain, the sense of competence may be worked through the constant swift from “seeing” and “doing” as artistic activity includes a dimension associated to visualization as well as the more idiosyncratic personal expression of the artist (Engel, 1995).

All in all, two attitudes may underlie educational opportunities for people who carry an intellectual deficit: one denies the possibility of talent without conventional intelligence; the other values all expressions of talent and fosters its development.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

In spite of the struggle to fight bias, many recurrent issues still prevail. For example, why are some works of art inside the circle of Outsider or Different Art persists. Are they not “true” works of art? Or does society
exclude them because they are created by people who do not satisfy the norm?

To what extent do we still maintain secular myths? To what extent does a somewhat biased attitude towards diversity inhibit the development of certain talents? How can attitudes towards diversity be (re)conceptualized? When can artists who have different characteristics exhibit works their works alongside with mainstream artists?

The purpose of this paper is to show how frail our judgements about creativity and art are. More specifically, this research report shows that people labelled as mentally retarded are capable of producing works of art judged as creative if they encounter an educational context that recognizes and supports them.

3. THE RESEARCH STUDIES

The aim of the research studies hereby discussed was to verify the way social judges from relevant domains and fields evaluate products developed by “labelled” people and compare these products to socially acknowledged works of art. Adopting Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) systems approach the various domains and fields of knowledge are responsible for the determination of what is creative. Teachers and psychologists reflect the prevailing social patterns and reveal the way future generations will be modelled in what regards creativity patterns. The latter are socially responsible for the assessment as well as intervention in what concerns behaviours which are outside the normality established realm at various levels. Likewise, teachers in general, and not only art teachers, should be included in the field of artistic creativity. Economy teachers know specifically about the viability and economical power of creative products. Humanity teachers reflect the prevailing social attitude and judge what may be considered as having cultural value. Science teachers master knowledge in a different area where creativity also is valuable. In turn, art teachers constitute the field by excellence. At the same time they are the specialized domain reflecting what it values and transmits to the future agents in that area of knowledge.

To evaluate the opinion of these specialists about the paintings a specific questionnaire was conceived. Based on the research on creative products, originality and elaboration (Torrance, 1966), relevance,
appropriateness and originality (e.g. Nickerson, Perkins & Smith, 1985), powerfulness (Perkins, 1981), novelty, adaptation to reality, communicability, aesthetic agreeableness and transforming potential (MacKinnon, 1978), novelty, synthesis, elegancy and complexity (Besemer & Treffinger, 1981) were included as criteria implicitly incorporated in the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions in three sets of items. For each of the projected paintings of the first sets, the subjects had to decide the degree of agreement with sentences relative to the criteria of assessment of creative products, using a scale from 1 to 5: “I like this work” – global likeness; “this work is exhibited in a museum” – value attribution; “this work is original” – creativity; “this work communicates feelings” - emotiveness and motivation; “this work shows complexity of thought” – cognitive/intellectual recognition; “this work displays aesthetic sensibility” – creativity and emotiveness; “this work reveals abstractness” - cognitive/intellectual recognition. “Which of the pictures were created by the same artist”, was an additional question for the non-figurative pictures that could eventually reveal differences in the judgements made by subjects who recognized one of the artist’s clearly identifiable styles. The third set of questions consisted of the evaluation of the process shown in one minute films. The subjects were asked to evaluate in a rating scale from 1 to 5: “Technical expertise” - knowledge and motor dexterity and “Creativity patent in the process” – creativity.

In both studies participated a total of 352 subjects: 179 teachers – 61 of arts, 54 of economy, 45 of humanities and 19 of sciences and 173 psychologists - 131 graduate students and 42 post-graduate students of psychology. 277 were female and 75 male with the mean age of 31. The subjects were asked to look for twenty seconds to each of the images of a set and to answer the questionnaire when the slide of the whole set of images was projected so that they could compare the images. The fact that three of the images and two of the films were produced by two artists who attend an institution for mentally retarded was never mentioned. The first two sets of images were composed of eleven photographic reproductions, five figurative and six non-figurative. The third set consisted of the projection of videos of three processes of pictorial production. The images were selected according to their proximity in terms of several of dimensions and to the opinion of five external judges knowledgeable in the art domain. Study 1 included a figurative work of artist B (Picture 3) in a set of five figurative works and two works of artist H in a set of six non-figurative works (Pictures 6 and 11). In Study 2 the three works of artists B and C, although representative of their production, differed from the ones shown in Study 1, enabling the artists’ creative work to be evaluated as a
whole and not by a specific work. The third set (Videos 2 and 3), identical in both studies, intended to supply additional information of the process of creativity and execution: gestures, speed, acuity and motor dexterity, methodology and spontaneity. To contrast with the videos of the hands and body of the two labelled artists, we included a rigorous simulation of the execution of a famous artist. In spite of demonstrating the process of artistic creation, the three videos depicted three different situations.

Study 1 (Bahia, Moreno. & Nogueira, in press)

The participants in Study 1 were 114 art, economy and humanities teachers. The Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures revealed significant differences between the pictures (Wilks’ \(\lambda=0.349\) with F (10, 104) = 19.42, p < 0.01), with no differences in terms of gender (F (1) = 0.783, n.s.), knowledge domain (F(2)= 0.042, n.s.) nor the recognition of artist H’s personal style (F(1)= 0.378, n.s.). Picture 6, alongside with another non-figurative picture, is the most appreciated. Although less appreciated than picture 6, Picture 11 is rated in the same way as the majority of the pictures, that is, it is as appreciated as four non-figurative pictures projected, as well as three figurative pictures created by renowned artists. Picture 3 is one of the least appreciated. Schematically, the order of the appreciation of the pictures was: 2, 3, 9 < 4, 11, 8, 1, 10, 5 < 7, 6.

The MANOVA with repeated measures revealed significant differences between the videos (Wilks’ \(\lambda=0.397\) for F (4, 108) = 40.98, p < 0.05). Videos 1 and 3 are rated higher than Video 2 in technical expertise and Video 1 higher than the others in creativity. There are no effects from the gender, professional group or the recognition of the style.

Study 2 (Bahia., Nogueira & Moreno, in press)

In Study 2 participated 65 teachers and 173 psychologists, in a total of 238 subjects. The Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures revealed significant differences between the pictures ((Wilks’ \(\lambda=0.269\) with F(10, 228)= 62.09, p < 0.01). Artist H’s Picture 6 is the most rated, followed by artist H’s Picture 11, and 9, 7, 5. Then come Pictures 4, 1, 10 and 8, and Artist B’s Picture 3, and the least rated is Picture 2. In order: 2 < 3 < 4, 1, 10, 8 < 11, 9, 7, 5 < 6, with no significant differences in the evaluations of the pictures separated by the comers, all comparisons with Bonferroni’s adjustment.
The comparisons between psychologists and teacher reveals the effect of this variable in interaction with the pictures (Wilks’ $\lambda$=0.91 with $F(10, 227)= 2.28$, $p< 0.05$). The recognition of the same artist (Pictures 6 and 11 by artist H) also has an effect in the evaluation of the pictures (Wilks’ $\lambda$=0.92 with $F(10, 227)= 2.1$, $p< 0.05$). No differences were found between genders ($F(1)= 0.783$, n.s.) and the different groups of teachers ($F(2)= 0.042$, n.s.).

The MANOVA with repeated measures revealed significant differences between the three videos (Wilks’ $\lambda$=0.473 with $F(4, 234)=, p< 0.01$) and in the two dimensions (pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni’s adjustment). Video 1 is more rated than 3 and 2 and video 3 is more rated than 2. The evaluations of the videos in what regards technical expertise are similar for both gender, ($F(1)= .09$, n.s.), different professions ($F(1)= 3.64$, n.s.) and for the participants who recognised and did not recognise the same artist ($F(1)= 0.07$, n.s.). In the creativity patent in the process the results are equally similar (respectively, $F(1)= 0.03$, n.s., $F(1)= 3.75$, n.s., $F(1)= 0.002$, n.s.).

4. DISCUSSION

Artist H’s Picture 6 is rated in both studies higher than any other. Picture 11, is rated in both studies as in the group of the pictures that follows Picture 6 in terms of appreciation. Artist B’s Picture 3 is the second least appreciated in both studies, although the average rate for all pictures is always above 3, therefore all are rated above average. On the whole, the order of appreciation (from the least to the most) of the pictures in both studies is similar (2, 3, 9 < 4, 11, 8, 1, 10, 5 < 7, 6 and 2 < 3 < 4, 1, 10, 8 < 11, 9, 7, 5 < 6). The most relevant feature of this result is that the non-figurative (6 to 11) paintings are more rated than the figurative ones (1 to 5) in all dimensions. Likeness, value, creativity, communicability, aesthetic sensibility, abstractness, complexity are more valued when the picture is not figurative, suggesting a somewhat concrete approach to the evaluation of the paintings.

The evaluation of the videos in terms of technical expertise does not reveal overall differences if we add the answers of both studies. The only dimension where the artists who are target of these studies were negatively distinguished was in the creativity patent in the process of execution. The most plausible explanation is that the video of the actor impersonating a painter showed an unexpected ending whereas the video of artists showed an expected scene.
In specific terms, the participants in Study 2 who recognised the pictures of the same artist rated all pictures more than those who did not. Artist H's style is impersonal and its recognition presupposes some distance, therefore an intellectualization characteristic of contemporary art, and allegedly a different way of seeing, noticing and understanding more meanings. Therefore, the subjects who recognise the style of artist H may have a more sophisticated critical judgement, appreciating more the paintings they saw.

On the other hand, psychologists appreciated less all the paintings than teachers. As a class, psychologists constitute the domain of knowledge that has been partially responsible for labelling some citizens as less able and that has produced research justifying that some expressions of talent are not creative. Logically these results cannot be generalised, but it may be symptomatic that there is a difference in the judgement of psychologists compared to teachers, not in terms of the labelled artists, but of as a whole.

Do psychologists look at other different dimensions whilst evaluating works of art? Do they know less about art? Or are they more cautious in their judgements? Or do teachers evaluate with more conviction and therefore rate higher?

In spite of some differences in the groups of subjects, the pictures of the artists with mental retardation are not considered less creative, or less complex, or abstract, than the socially acknowledge works of art.

5. CONCLUSION

Artist B and H encountered in their life courses an educational context within a climate that promotes autonomy and reinforces competence, both universal needs that must be satisfied for psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Their artistic competence has been worked by their mentor worked through a constant swift from "seeing" and "doing" (Engel, 1995), that is, an intervention and investment both in visualization and technique, in a climate where the expression of creativity and diversity is promoted. The key factor to the promotion of this climate is the abolition of the idea of a hierarchy determined by some socially instituted competences, abilities and aptitudes in detriment of other personal qualities which may be more crucial for the expression of creative potential. Basically, room is given to the persecution of what Feldman (1980) called the universal "transformational imperative". Once found the way of expressing it (in this case through a particular painting technique),

126
the investment in practice allows the personal fulfilment the ancient Greek associated to the term *kraine*.

The case of these two artistic talents who, although labelled as mentally retarded, conceived creative products recognised by members of that society as being of a "superior" quality shows the support they have encountered has given them the opportunity of expressing their creative talent. By acknowledging the fragility of unfounded judgements based on abstract conceptualizations, a less biased and more humane and enriching education may be possible and similar talents may also be developed.

Psychologists and teachers are simultaneously products and producers of creativity and reflect as well as reveal the prevailing social patterns. If they are able to make an unbiased judgement of creative products, why does such a large part of society has difficulty in acknowledging that people labelled as mentally retarded are not able to true create works of art? Why does society as a whole insist in associating "perfection" to Orphic expressions of creativity? What will happen if society prevails to deny "savants" of the skill, will and thrill they may experience whilst engaging in the expression of their creative potential? A more passionate and Orphic approach that allows all members of society to see the orchestration of the multiple dimensions that flow in the creative act would lead to a less biased look on creativity.

Fortunately, against all odds educators may slowly be building a society where all its talents may be fully developed.

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FAISCA. REVISTA DE ALTAS CAPACIDADES
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SUMARIO
VaKE and Education for Leadership and European Citizenship
Sieglinde Weyringer, Jean-Luc Patry ........................................... pág. 4

Valoración por profesores e iguales en función de las variables
capacidad y género.
Juan Antonio Elices Simón, Marcela Palazuelo Martínez, Maximiano del
Caño Sánchez ............................................................................ pág. 28

Proyecto de investigación e innovación: Una propuesta de intervención
didáctica para alumnos y alumnas con aptitudes sobresalientes.
Alejandra Calatayud Morán, Adriana Forero Lancheros, María del Carmen
Ramírez González................................................................. pág. 57

De l'adéquation d'un test informatisé en mathematiques pour élèves a
haute potentiel presentant un flechissement scolaire a l'age de la puberte.
Jang Shiltz, Lony Shiltz .............................................................. pág. 84

Diferencias evolutivas y variabilidad intelectual entre estudiantes con
alta capacidad.
Luz Pérez Sanchez, Coral González Barberá............................... pág. 106

Talents against all Odds.
Sara Bahia.................................................................................. pág. 118

SUPLEMENTO
Pedagogía de una maestra, adelantada a su tiempo.
Natividad Araque Hontangas..................................................... pag. 130