

## A REVIEW OF THE INQUIRY OF CREATIVITY IN OLDER ADULTS IN JOURNALS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Everyone possesses creativity and this ability is a normal distribution. However, most creativity researchers select eminent scientists or artists. In addition, in the education literature, creativity research focuses more on children or adolescents (especially college students) rather than older adults. The purpose of this study was to examine the intellectual perceptions of creativity in older adults found in scholarly journals. This review attempted to sort out the assumptions underlying the portrayal of older adults and their relationship with creativity in scholarly journals from 1980 to 2012. After reviewing 56 journal articles, two themes emerged: the optimistic view of older adult lives and the need for creativity for successful aging. There is a call from not only educators but also policy makers to invest more funds and energy to promote creativity for (older) adult learners.*

**KEYWORDS:** Older adults, adult education, literature review, creativity.

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### INTRODUCTION

Everyone possesses creativity and this ability is a normal distribution (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). However, most creativity researchers select eminent scientists or artists—for example, Einstein or Picasso—as target subjects (Ivcevic, 2009). This fascination with elites reflects the assumption that because geniuses are considered to be extreme in our society and their abilities are viewed as deviating from the normal, the likelihood of detecting a significant difference, especially in terms of cognitive function, is high.

In *Creativity: Genius and other myths*, Weisberg (1986) disputed the romantic view that there are creative enterprises in the arts and sciences. In his view, “creative individuals possess no extraordinary characteristics—basically, they do what we are all capable of doing” (Weisberg, 1986, p. 12). Weisberg (1986) believed that great leaps demonstrated by geniuses do not exist; rather, the creative action is incremental and stepwise. In addition, he doubted whether or not creative thinking exists because geniuses use their expertise, knowledge, and logical reasoning abilities to attain their achievements. Recent studies conducted by neurologists using electroencephalography (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) reveal that the brain areas that are active when people are involved in creative tasks are the same brain areas that are active when people are involved in many ordinary tasks. All that is required to perform creativity is to be a healthy person that processes everyday functioning (Sawyer, 2011).

In the education literature, creativity research focuses more on children or adolescents rather than older adults. This lukewarm attitude from scholars reflects the belief that creativity is more obvious in childhood than in adulthood because adults are burdened by fixed assumptions and routines that are not conducive to creative thinking (Runco, 2007). Nevertheless, this traditional idea has been challenged (Butler, 1967; Simonton, 1990). For

example, Vygotsky (1931/1991) believed that the imagination is fully mature only in the developmental stage of adulthood.

The preceding discussion apparently indicates that there is a research gap about the creativity research in older adults. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the intellectual perceptions of creativity in older adults found in scholarly journals. It is hoped to call more attention to the related research community. Specifically, this study attempted to address the following three research questions:

1. How do researchers perceive creativity in older adults?
2. What is the relationship between creativity and older adults?
3. What can adult educators learn from these findings in journals to promote creativity?

## **METHOD**

### **Literature Search**

Standard search procedures were used to locate published studies. For example, three electronic databases were used: the EBSCOhost Database, the ProQuest Educational Journal, and the Google Scholar. The studies were found using the key terms *creativity*, *creativity training*, *adults*, and *older adults*, and they were limited to English, peer-reviewed journals. The publication dates ranged from 1980 to 2012. As a result, a total of 56 journal articles from different fields were selected for this study.

### **Coding of Data**

After all relevant journal articles were selected, each study was coded as follows: (a) author, (b) date of publication, (c) published information, (d) abstract, (e) methodology, (f) topic, and (g) key words provided by the author(s). All the coding was first keyed in Microsoft Excel and then the computer-assisted data qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program HyperRESEARCH 3.5 (2013) was used for running the data analysis. A qualitative content analysis was used to further analyze this database. The open coding strategy was inspired by the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which is an inductive approach that examines the repetition of phrases, words, and key constructs. In addition to using the qualitative methodology, the use of frequency counts of instances as a measure of different categories to display the characteristics of this data set was added in the main analysis. By doing so, it provided a holistic picture to understand the proposed research inquiry from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective.

### **Results**

The findings were organized into three sections. First, a visual presentation was done by using a word cloud in order to attain a quick glimpse of this data set. Second, the characteristics of this data set were investigated by decade, methodology, field of the study, and topic. Finally, the content analysis was used to examine the emergent themes found in the data set by portraying the relationship between older adults and creativity from the perceptions of researchers.

### **Word Cloud**

Before coding the data, the preliminary analysis was performed by Wordle (<http://www.wordle.net>). In order to grasp some possible patterns in blog text, Wordle was used for the presentation of word count, thereby obtaining a quick, brief, and visualized glimpse of the data. McNaught and Lam (2010) have demonstrated the usefulness of word



Field of study	
Adult education	7 (13%)
Psychology	11 (20%)
Clinic	8 (14%)
Social science	11 (20%)
Gerontology	19 (33%)
Topic	
Aging issues	8 (14%)
Creative arts and behavior	24(43%)
Benefits of creativity	20 (36%)
Self development	4 (7%)

### Themes That Emerged from the Literature

An analysis of the 56 journal articles published between 1980 and 2012 revealed the following general two major themes: the optimistic view of older adult lives and the need for creativity for successful aging.

#### The optimistic view of older adults lives.

Although creativity research on adult groups has shown that creative productivity peaks were adults reach their 30s and 40s (Lehman, 1960, 1958), this is not to say that creativity significantly declines with age. Hickson and Housley (1997) stated that “creativity is not a time bound act nor a function of chronological age” (p. 540). Indeed, as Simonton (1998) noted, “creativity of the highest caliber can continue until a person’s final days” (pp. 14-15). As a matter of fact, Sasser-Coen (1993) believed that creativity changes rather than declines with age. After examining the literature about creative achievement and age, Simonton (1999) concluded that the research of the longitudinal fluctuations in the output of creative products has established the following four empirical generalizations: (a) the output of creative products tends to increase as a curvilinear, single-peak function of age; (b) this trajectory in output is a function of career age rather than chronological age; (c) the specific shape of the curve varies according to the discipline; and (d) the quantity of major works of eminence is positively related to total works generated, and the quality ratio is not related to developmental trends.

The positive attitude toward older adults can be illustrated by Lindauer’s (1998) statement, “imaginative and other high order cognitive abilities need not decline or be lost with increasing age. They can continue into old age and many even flower” (p. 247). Simonton (1990) refuted the idea that “creativity is the prerogative of youth, whereas old age is virtually synonymous with a decline in creative powers” (p. 626). He believed that this kind of stereotype, in fact, stems from the misunderstanding of the attitude of intellectual decrement. For adults, it should differentiate two types of mental abilities: fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence. The former is related to reaction times to stimuli, whereas the latter pertains to logical reasoning, judgments, and reflection (Cattell, 1963; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Cross-sectional studies on adult age differences have shown that fluid intelligence abilities began to decline in early adulthood; however, crystallized intelligence abilities remain constant and even increase with increasing age (Alpaugh et al., 1982; Marsiske & Willis, 1998; McCrae, Arenberg, & Costa, 1987).

From the perspective of adult education, the biggest advantage of older adults is the maturity and fruitful experience (Brookfield, 1986; Kidd, 1977). This position is confirmed by a study of Western artists conducted by Lindauer, Orwoll, and Kelley (1997). The older artists in their study sustained a high level of achievement even though they suffered several age-related issues, such as sensory and motor losses, poor and declining health, and reduced energy. These older artists continued to develop their skills and knowledge. Age seemed to benefit the artists' work to some extent because their arts became more mature and their attitudes about their artwork became more positive.

Several adult educators held a positive view of adult learners and believed that creativity was an important catalyst to stimulate adults' intellectual interest, self-expression, and curiosity to explore their unfinished journey (Edelson, 1999; Haanstra, 1999; Lones, 2000). Thus, Edelson (1999) suggested several approaches in which adult and continuing educators promote creativity: organizing for innovation, enhancing motivation to create, promoting self-efficacy, developing expertise, allowing time for the generation of new ideas, providing feedback and reality checking, playing at work, working at play, having a personalized environment, planning for accidents, selecting a good staff, and encouraging group interactions (pp. 9-11).

### **The need for creativity for successful aging**

Maslow (1968) believed that creativity was a prominent quality in individuals who had reached self-actualization, which is a high-level need in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Goff (1992, 1993) and Su (2009) stressed the importance of creativity for older adults in order to promote lifelong learning. Most important, Goff (1992) pointed out that "creative thinking skills are key elements of successful personal adjustments as well as in meeting new challenges and dilemmas" (p. 48). Thus, he called for more creativity interventions to promote creative thinking in older adults. In fact, Smith and van der Meer (1990) found that creative people showed a less negative attitude toward aging because they felt more energetic while exercising creative activities. As a result, in the literature, an art activity is often used to stimulate positive effects in older adults.

Depp, Vahia, and Jeste (2012) defined successful aging as "getting a maximum of satisfaction and happiness out of life" (p. 460). The term successful aging is closely related to functional performance where people adapt tactics to cope with major life changes (Flood & Scharer, 2006). Several studies have reported that creativity is an important ingredient for successful aging, especially findings supporting the idea that creativity can be a beneficent factor for increasing mental and physical health, coping abilities, and meaningful productivity (Cropley, 1990; Duffey, Somody, & Clifford, 2006; Flood, 2006; Fisher & Specht, 1999; Nagalingam, 2007). In sum, creativity can help older adults "adapt more effectively to physical, psychological, and psychosocial changes that occur during old age" (Flood & Phillips, 2007, p. 390). As a result, Sierpina and Cole (2004) suggested that techniques for fostering creativity are important for people in later life and for people who may have different social needs.

From the perspective of lifespan developmental psychology, creativity is conducive to optimization and compensation of attaining desired levels of functioning (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980; Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999). Several benefits identified by Mirowsky and Ross (2007) shows that "on the social-psychological level, creative work may decrease depression, increase the sense of personal control, and improve cognitive function,

thereby indirectly improving psychological health” (pp. 398-399). Additionally, Hickson and Housley (1997) argued, “creative production may lead to both psychological and spiritual renewal for the older adult. It may lead to greater clarity of being, and the creative flow may produce an optimal experience” (p. 542). Sinnott (1998) also pointed out that creativity may help people who are going through a midlife crisis. Cohen (2001) identified four potential stages in the second half of life: midlife reevaluation, liberation, summing up, and encore (p. 52). He thought creative expression plays an important role in every stage of a person’s second half of life by adding energy and translating inner needs and desires, thereby creating a meaningful life.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This review presented the related literature from different fields and made an effort to synthesize the most salient themes. It is evident that this line of research still has a long way to go, especially in adult education literature. Research clearly needs to include the notion of creative thinking in the adult education curriculum. Based on this review, there is no question that there are physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of creativity for older adults. There is a call from not only educators but also policy makers to invest more funds and energy in this area. Under the umbrella of lifelong learning, further research would investigate the effects of creativity on older adults in order to obtain greater insights into this phenomenon.

This review also attempted to sort out the assumptions underlying the portrayal of older adults and their relationship with creativity in scholarly journals from 1980 to 2012. After reviewing 56 journal articles, two themes emerged: the optimistic view of older adult lives and the need for creativity for successful aging. In a sense, these findings reflect that “age need not silence outstanding creativity in the last years” (Simonton, 1990, p. 630). According to this survey of the literature, the effects of creativity on older adults are still underestimated. Without a doubt, more appropriate creativity-related interventions should be tested by empirical studies to validate the effects. Policies and supporting environments should also be built and serve as scaffolding to promote creativity in older adults. For example, creativity development can be implemented in the adult education curriculum. By practicing this idea in formal education, it is expected that if adult learners produce some beneficial learning outcomes, then they might extend their creative thinking into their daily lives.

It is clear that this study revealed a bigger picture regarding the close relationship between creativity and successful aging. It is quite true that, as Fisher and Specht (1999) stated “ultimately, successful aging is about being happy and being hopeful and making the most of what our lives have to offer in the broadest sense” (p. 472). As suggested by Richards (2007b), this everyday creativity could benefit adults at least 12 different ways. Most important, creativity has a healing power that connects body, mind, and spirit (Richards, 2007a).

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