

Elgar Encyclopedia of Innovation Management

Edited by

Päivi Eriksson

Professor, Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Tero Montonen

Associate Professor, Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Pikka-Maaria Laine

Senior University Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Finland

Anna Hannula

University Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Finland

ELGAR ENCYCLOPEDIAS IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT



Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

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Published by
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited
The Lypiatts
15 Lansdown Road
Cheltenham
Glos GL50 2JA
UK

Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
William Pratt House
9 Dewey Court
Northampton
Massachusetts 01060
USA

Authorised representative in the EU for GPSR queries only: Easy Access System Europe –
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025933275

This book is available electronically in the **Elgaronline**
Business subject collection
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035306459>

ISBN 978 1 0353 0644 2 (cased)
ISBN 978 1 0353 0645 9 (eBook)

49. Radical creativity

ANNIKA BLOMBERG

Outline of the topic

Creativity is discussed in many fields, from the creative arts to the technical sciences. In this entry, creativity is approached from the viewpoint of business and management literature, where it is closely connected to innovation. Some scholars consider creativity and innovation to be synonymous, while most scholars see creativity preceding innovation. In other words, creativity is typically considered an antecedent of innovation, in that creativity refers to the process of idea generation and exploration, while innovation also encompasses the implementation, application and commercialization of those ideas. This entry centres on radical creativity, which can be defined as creativity that challenges and transcends existing frameworks and conventions. Radical creativity is important for innovation and innovation management, as it enables us to approach issues in new ways, redefine problems or ask different questions, and break from traditional ways of thinking.

There is a variety of ideas, processes, products or aspects that can be conceptualized as creativity, and often, the extant research speaks about creativity without making explicit whether it is about small improvements or radical ideas. However, in much of the literature on creativity and innovation, creativity has come to refer to incremental improvements or innovation that builds on and reproduces extant structures and practices and is closely entwined with neoliberal ideologies of unlimited growth, productivity and increasing consumption. In light of the grand societal challenges we are facing, there is a need for radical creativity aimed at challenging those structures and practices. This entry, first, looks at the ideological bindings of the concept of creativity in contemporary literature, and then discusses the concept of radical creativity and how it could be applied in addressing societal challenges.

Conceptual overview and discussion

Creativity can be conceptualized in different ways, and scholars have provided numerous typologies of creativity – not to talk about innovation – each of them emphasizing different features of the phenomenon. Many

typologies distinguish small, everyday acts of creativity from more groundbreaking creativity. For instance, Gilson and Madjar label them incremental creativity and radical creativity, while Gardner discusses revolutionary and evolutionary creativity. Incremental or evolutionary creativity refers to minor modifications and improvements to existing practices and frameworks, while radical or revolutionary creativity refers to creativity that differs substantially from existing practices. Whereas Gilson and Madjar posit that both forms of creativity are equally important, Gardner seems to argue for the superiority of revolutionary creativity, defined as something that challenges prevailing assumptions.

This entry centres on radical creativity that departs from the assumptions that prevail in much of the academic and popular literature. This literature tends to present creativity as a desirable capacity for individuals, organizations and societies, and, as posited by Bilton, this desirability derives from the assumption of creativity as ‘manageable’. By manageable creativity, Bilton refers to creativity that has been defined in managerial terms as a business competence or commodity. Thus, by being creative, organizations can remain competitive and succeed, and individuals can increase their employability and value at work. This thinking posits creativity as a necessity, even a duty, in contemporary economies for individuals, organizations and societies.

When presented as a necessity for success and competitiveness, the concept of creativity follows a neoliberal logic that sees financial success, growth and competitiveness as the ultimate goals for companies and even for individuals and societies. Consequently, much of the innovation literature posits that organizations need to be creative to innovate, to remain competitive and even to survive. However, when creativity is conceptualized as a ‘tool’ for increased productivity, competitiveness and growth, what follows is that the concept of creativity comes to equal incremental creativity rather than radical or revolutionary. Incremental creativity refers to creativity that is somehow novel but represents relatively small improvements that take place within the existing structures and systems, and that reproduces dominant, often business-centric ways of thinking. Radical creativity, on the other hand, is creativity that differs substantially from existing practices

or that even challenges extant structures and systems.

Currently, it is increasingly agreed that creativity derives not from single creative individuals or organizations but rather takes place in interactions and relationships between individuals. This so-called sociocultural paradigm has offered a promising avenue for understanding creativity, as it abandons the idea of single heroic creatives and directs the emphasis on interactions and sociocultural conditions that enable and facilitate creativity. However, despite a different view of the locus of creativity, assumptions on the desirability and manageability of creativity often prevail, firmly rooting the concept in existing structures and systems.

The discussion of radical or incremental creativity connects with the paradox inherent in the widely agreed-upon elements of the definition of creativity. Most creativity scholars emphasize that creativity needs to be both novel and unique but also valuable, useful or appropriate. The problem is that, if the value, usefulness or appropriateness is assessed from the viewpoint of existing systems, structures and assumptions, there is a risk that it results in improvements in the 'business as usual' and maintains, even reproduces, dominant structures. This is problematic, as it is becoming increasingly clear that the 'business as usual' approach is insupportable for planet Earth. If the applicability of an idea is evaluated from the perspective of whether it manages to maintain the dominant assumptions of, for instance, unlimited economic growth and increasing production and consumption, more radical forms of creativity are simultaneously disabled or at least limited.

Therefore, we need to detach from the concept of creativity as a form of neoliberal necessity and embrace radical forms of creativity. These radical forms of creativity are needed to rethink and challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions in society, such as anthropocentrism, consumerism and infinite economic growth and the related structures and practices. Creativity that departs from the taken-for-granted assumptions and structures needs to be novel, but its usefulness, appropriateness or value should not be assessed from the viewpoint of existing frameworks of the society. Rather, it should be based on whether it is novel and manages to shake the status quo, challenge the predominant ways of

thinking and doing business or even changing the rules of the game.

Application: green care

Next, a process model for radical creative organizing is presented, following a discussion of its applicability. Then, green care is discussed as an example of social innovation that contains elements of radical creativity.

Chiles and colleagues suggest an approach to creative organizing called dynamic creation, which consists of three processes: forming expectations of an imagined future, reshuffling combinations of resources and participating in disequilibrium market processes. The first process, forming expectations of an imagined future, requires the ability to create mental images of a desired future and empathy to imagine how it feels from another person's perspective. These subjective expectations of an imagined future can be built on a society that is quite different from that of today, and, through empathy, the needs of future generations can be imagined. The second process consists of reiterative processes of combining and recombining resources in ways that the novel solutions can be realized. This can happen through unique resources or through combining resources in a unique way. The third process, participating in disequilibrium in the market, refers to the process through which the present socio-economic order is shaken and a new socio-economic order is created. By introducing novelty and heterogeneity into the market, the market is pushed to a dynamic course that may never reach equilibrium.

While this suggested approach works within the idea of the market, although with the aim of destabilizing it, it can also end in a more radical way. To better align with the idea of radical creativity, the last step of dynamic creation could be redefining the purpose and meaning of the market, what is exchanged on the market, who the agents operating on the market are and what its operating logic is.

While the dynamic creation approach remains on a relatively abstract level, it illustrates how radical creativity can start from imagining a desirable future, which is the first step in transformational change. A desirable future emerges from hopes and expectations and influences actions and decisions along the way, enabling one to contribute actively to building a sustainable future rather than

waiting for its actualization. Empathy, on the other hand, enables broadening the perspective to a wider range of people and reflecting on one's actions from their perspective. Empathy is a crucial aspect of building a more sustainable society, as it encourages us to consider the consequences of our actions from the perspective of marginalized stakeholders as well as future generations. Combination and recombination of resources and ideas are at the core of all creativity, while, in the process of radical creative organizing, the end point could be the introduction of novelty and heterogeneity that radically challenges the market in question – or even the whole idea of market.

Next, another more practical example of social innovation from the viewpoint of radical creativity is considered. García-Llorente and colleagues suggest green care as an umbrella concept that encompasses activities that use and develop nature- and animal-assisted methods to improve human well-being while also taking care of animals and nature. The main fields of activity are animal-assisted therapy and activities and nature-assisted methods. Green care activities combine the already widely evidenced benefits of being in nature to established health-care services, such as therapy, rehabilitation or education. While green care and nature- or animal-assisted care services perhaps do not radically restructure current societies, many aspects of radical creativity are implicated in their development. Although green care functions within the existing logic of health-care provision, it is based on a closer and relational relationship with nature; thus, it may help to reconsider the human–nature relationship and the role of nature in human well-being. It also takes the well-being of nature and animals seriously and prioritizes the overall well-being of humans and nonhumans over profit maximization. While green care is based on an old idea – the well-being benefits of nature – it is combined in new ways with existing health-care services. The radical creativity of green care lies in the moving of health-care services from indoor to nature, in transgressing the human–nature divide by making nature and animals active agents in health-care processes and, eventually, in challenging the prevailing anthropocentrism of much of Western health-care.

Critical summary

In business and management literature, the concept of creativity tends to carry the burden of neoliberalist ethos and has become a productivity-driven concept. While it might have incontestable value, particularly for companies interested in expanding and increasing productivity while continuing their businesses as usual, it has come to refer to incremental creativity and exclude more radical forms of creativity. Therefore, to address many of the grand challenges we are facing, creativity needs radical rethinking. It has to be freed from the neoliberal discourse in which it is tied to productivity, growth and individuals as neoliberal subjects. There is a need for radical creativity, in other words, creativity that shakes the existing structures and systems and challenges conventional ways of thinking.

Consequently, the appropriateness, usefulness or value of creativity should not be assessed based on economic measures and its ability to generate profits and competitive advantage but rather by its capacity to challenge conventional ways of thinking and doing. Movements aiming at challenging conventional thinking, such as ecocentrism, anti-consumerism and degrowth, provide fruitful starting points for both radical creativity and innovations that aim at increasing the overall well-being and equality of humans and non-humans and growth as measured in other than financial terms. However, radical creativity is not predictable, easy and nice but is rather unpredictable, often antisocial and accidental and requires unlearning, questioning and forgoing many things that may now feel natural and important. Therefore, politics and power issues included in the emergence and, particularly, the acceptance and application of radical creativity would provide fruitful avenues for future research.

Acknowledgment

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Research Council of Finland (Action4Commons project, decision 351328) for enabling this research

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