

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Products of the Process: Toward Exploring and Expanding the Benefits of Being Creative

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ABSTRACT

The traditionally studied positive outcomes of creativity tend to be product-focused, such as Big-C contributions, good grades, or strong work performance. This paper makes an argument for the importance of less-discussed products of the process—the benefits that arise from being creative, regardless of one's abilities or level of achievement. These positive outcomes are more tied to such meaning-related concepts as self-understanding, feeling one's life is significant and worth living, and gaining both short-term and long-term purposes. In highlighting these potential consequences of being creative, we get to question clear separations between processes and products in the field of creativity studies and show that engaging in the creative process itself “produces” experiences that are less tangible or even noticeable but by no means unimportant.

In general, creativity is more likely to be studied as an outcome than as a predictor (Forgeard and Kaufman 2016). In other words, researchers are more likely to focus on which variables are associated with higher levels of creativity, as opposed to how creativity is associated with (or predictive of) other variables or outcomes. Studies of the most popular topics or keywords have consistently turned up themes consistent with this trend, such as creativity enhancement or education, nuances of the creative process, or creativity in the workplace (Feist and Runco 1993; Holinger et al. 2024; Williams et al. 2016).

This outcome-focused approach has significant consequences for both the study and application of creativity. By concentrating on the factors that enhance creativity, researchers risk framing it as a static attribute or end goal, rather than as a dynamic force with far-reaching effects (e.g., Corazza 2016). Such a narrow lens limits our understanding of how creativity influences broader phenomena, such as societal change, personal development, or organizational growth. It may also reinforce a utilitarian view of creativity, in which creativity is valued primarily for its immediate outputs, such as innovation or productivity—while

neglecting creativity's potential to address complex challenges or inspire systemic transformation. Consequently, this focus could potentially shape not only research priorities but also, more broadly, how creativity is valued and cultivated in education and in society.

1 | Product-Oriented Positive Outcomes of Creativity

There have been calls for more scholarship that emphasizes positive outcomes (Kaufman 2018a, 2023, 2025), although it is important to note that there is already a wide array of work on this topic. Certainly, an obvious place to start is legendary, genius-level contributions (Simonton 2018). Paradigm-shifting and sometimes life-saving advances such as vaccines, computers, airplanes, the internet, or sustainable agriculture would not be possible without creativity. But everyday people who are not about to solve climate change can still use creativity to improve their quality of life in specific, concrete ways. Creativity drives city-level economic growth (Florida 2019), and creative

workers are more likely to be successful entrepreneurs (Chang and Chen 2020). Creative students are more likely to get higher grades (Gajda et al. 2017) and better standardized test scores (Kaufman et al. 2023).

Although it is easy to paint a rosy picture of the importance and impact of creativity, that would not be fully accurate. Big-C contributions still hold sway (although genius can emerge from not only creativity, but also intellect and leadership; Simonton 2009). And yet, the personality trait of conscientiousness is more strongly related to getting good grades in school (Poropat 2009, 2014a, 2014b) than measures of creative potential or self-ratings (Gajda et al. 2017). Further, an employee's conscientiousness and general mental ability typically show stronger relationships to their success in the workplace than do supervisor ratings of their creativity (Dunn et al. 1995; Nikolaou and Foti 2018; Schmidt and Hunter 1998). In addition, traits like emotional intelligence, resilience, and even interpersonal skills often play a critical role in fostering positive outcomes, particularly in environments that depend on teamwork and adaptability (e.g., García and Costa 2014; Sharma and Tiwari 2023). Furthermore, external factors such as access to resources, mentorship, and opportunities may outweigh creative potential in determining success across domains (e.g., Acar et al. 2023). This suggests that while creativity does serve as a specific valuable asset in the short term, it functions as part of a broader constellation of traits, abilities, and circumstances that predict positive outcomes.

One similarity that all of these different benefits share, though, from paradigm-shifting genius advances to a simple boost in getting good grades and performing well in the workplace, is that they are all product-focused. Much of the way we think about creativity centers on the final product. This can be traced to the standard definition of creativity as being new and task-appropriate (Stein 1953), which does not describe a process or person. It has only been recently that a process-oriented definition of creativity has been proposed (Green et al. 2024). Processes have been particularly important for sociocultural and distributed approaches to creativity (see Glăveanu 2014; Sawyer and DeZutter 2009), as they prioritize action and interaction. These perspectives focus on the dynamic, collaborative nature of creative activity, emphasizing how creativity arises through social exchanges, cultural practices, and material engagements. Rather than viewing creativity as an isolated event, they consider it an ongoing process shaped by the interactions between individuals, groups, and their cultural and material contexts, highlighting the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and shared meaning-making in creative endeavors.

More recently, developments brought about by posthumanism (see Chappell 2022) help to question not only such a product focus but also the assumption that people alone generate them. Posthumanist approaches to creativity emphasize the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans, and the material environment, suggesting that creativity emerges from networks of relations rather than solely from individual minds. This perspective challenges anthropocentric views, highlighting the role of tools, technologies, and ecosystems in co-creating ideas and artifacts, thus reframing creativity as a distributed,

collaborative process that transcends human actions and agency (e.g., Vinchon et al. 2023).

2 | Process-Oriented Positive Outcomes of Creativity

The product-related benefits of creativity are certainly important, but they may not be the best way of showing off the wonder of the construct, particularly for the everyday creator. As noted, many attributes, traits, or skills beyond creativity can boost someone's GPA or give them a leg up at work. However, some of creativity's other strengths place it in a more rarified place with longer-term or deeper benefits (Kaufman 2023). For example, many of creativity's advantages connect in some way to achieving meaning in life (Kapoor and Kaufman 2020; Kaufman 2018b).

There are several dimensions to meaning, including coherence, significance, purpose, and experiential appreciation (Kim et al. 2022; King and Hicks 2021; Martela and Steger 2016). Coherence is when someone feels that their life makes sense and their actions are consistent with their beliefs. Significance relates to someone believing that their life has value, is worth living, and that they matter. Purpose is when someone has goals and aspirations that provide direction and motivation. More recently, there has been work on experiential appreciation (enjoying every moment of the day). Together, these dimensions offer a holistic understanding of what it means to live a meaningful life.

How can people engaging in creative activities help bring them closer to these different aspects of meaning? To start, expressive writing (Pennebaker 1997) can help enhance the self-insight associated with coherence. So, too, can creativity-related processes such as cognitive reappraisal, in which one can consider many alternate ways of understanding potentially upsetting incidents from our past (Wu et al. 2017). Imagine a person keeping a regular journal or diary, writing a memoir, blogging, or working on a novel. They are working through their thoughts, emotions, and perhaps unpleasant memories. In doing so, they might reflect on their lives, consider past decisions, and ponder what they might do in future situations; such creative acts can also help people move past trauma (Forgeard 2013). These internal dialogues, which might explore many different views or implications of past actions, may mirror the process of divergent thinking (Wu et al. 2019). As long as these thoughts and writings do not turn into excessive ruminations (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema et al. 1997), this process should be beneficial.

Being creative can also lead to many different positive outcomes that can lead to people feeling significant and as though their life matters, both short term and long term (Holinger and Kaufman 2024). Engaging in creative activities, particularly in the arts, can help people recover from bad moods and regain emotional equilibrium (Drake 2019). Someone who is drawing or writing and focused on the enjoyment inherent in the task is not thinking about worries or concerns (Drake and Winner 2012). Both experiencing and creating art can help people feel connected to others, both locally (Adams-Price and Morse 2024) and globally (Smith 2014).

Longer term, one might think about leaving some kind of a legacy behind (Lifton 1987). Some turn to children or religion or other pathways, but there are those who focus on their creative efforts. Big-C contributions certainly would qualify, but so too would the kind of mini-c or little-c works that might be cherished by the creator's family, friends, or local community. These smaller-scale creative acts carry profound meaning by preserving personal stories, cultural traditions, and emotional connections. They remind us that legacies are not always about widespread recognition but about creating something that resonates deeply with those it touches, leaving a lasting impression in its own unique way (Zheng and Kaufman 2024). A handmade quilt, a family recipe book, or a local mural can stand as legacies in their own way, albeit on a smaller scale than the Polio vaccine or *Hamlet*.

Finally, life purpose can come to people through conscious effort and reflection, through a response to a particular event they experience, or by seeing someone else make a difference and wanting to pursue what they do (McKnight and Kashdan 2009). Many people use their creativity on a larger scale to discover and pursue their purpose. They might think of new ways to find funding for their animal rescue, develop imaginative curricula to teach their students, or engage in creative leadership to unite artists in fighting copyright infringement by tech companies. On a daily basis, people can find purpose in daily life from engaging in meaningful creative work (Amabile and Kramer 2011). This sense of purpose often arises from the satisfaction of seeing one's efforts lead to tangible results, whether in the form of solving problems, contributing to a larger goal, or expressing personal values and identity. Over time, this alignment between creativity and purpose can enhance overall well-being and provide a motivating force that sustains individuals through challenges and uncertainties.

These are only the tip of the iceberg (Kaufman and Glăveanu 2023). Being creative can also help people be less prejudiced (Groyecka-Bernard et al. 2021) and reduce automatic stereotyping (Sassenberg and Moskowitz 2005), indicating that those people who engage in creative thinking may be more likely to be tolerant of others and care about equity (Luria and Kaufman 2017). Engaging in creative activities (usually arts, crafts, or singing) can help older adults' cognition; they are less likely to experience dementia in older age (Verghese et al. 2003) and those older adults with dementia can slow its progress with creative actions (Ward et al. 2021). Being creativity can help people recover from a stressful work week (Eschleman et al. 2017) and even maintain their romantic passion (Carswell et al. 2019). These diverse benefits underscore creativity's far-reaching influence, extending well beyond traditional notions of artistic or innovative output to enhance various aspects of human flourishing.

3 | Widening Our Perspective About the Outcomes of Creativity

An important point to make is that someone's actual level of creative ability or talent is generally not related to the degree to which they can benefit from the creative process. Most benefits that come from actually being creative are not related to

the number or originality of ideas generated. The creative process tends to help people understand themselves, feel their life is significant and worth living, and gain purpose—regardless of whether their output skews more toward mini-c or Big-C (Kaufman 2023). In addition to these personal benefits, engaging in creativity can foster stronger social connections. Creative activities often encourage collaboration and shared experiences, which can deepen relationships and build a sense of community. Furthermore, the emotional expression inherent in creativity can serve as a powerful tool for coping with adversity, helping individuals process difficult experiences and find new perspectives. This adaptability is particularly valuable in navigating life's uncertainties, making creativity not just a source of joy but also a key contributor to psychological resilience and overall well-being.

Using these lenses, we can reach a different understanding of the relationship between products and processes in creativity. Traditionally treated as if they are separate categories (Rhodes 1961), processes can themselves be products—think, for example, about dance performances or improv sessions—and products, in turn, can be short-lived markers of longer-term processes—for instance, prototyping leads to 'temporary' productions in the service of continuous work.

Another example is found in digital content creation, such as livestreaming on platforms like YouTube (e.g., Ceh et al. 2023). The act of livestreaming is a process of real-time engagement and improvisation, yet it simultaneously generates a product in the form of recorded videos that can be revisited and repurposed. These recordings, however, are often seen as transient or secondary to the ongoing creative interaction between the creator and their audience, highlighting how processes and products can be intertwined in contemporary creative practices.

But there is a deeper meaning to the notion of "products of the process" as it is used here. These outcomes are often subjective, intangible and ephemeral. They are, thus, easy to ignore and render invisible; they can also be more easily missed by creators themselves (see also the notion of "shadow creativity" in Kaufman and Glăveanu 2022). Yet they contribute to what makes creative processes engaging, meaningful and, oftentimes, fun. Further, they also add to ongoing efforts meant to highlight the deeper benefits of creativity as a predictor rather than an outcome variable. What we need next are theories, frameworks and methodologies that can allow us to highlight the "products of the process" as an ever-present dimension of creative action.

For example, process-oriented ethnography and longitudinal case studies could reveal how creative actions unfold over time, thereby showing the interplay between intermediate products and larger creative goals. Systemic frameworks, such as activity theory or network analysis, can emphasize how creative outputs serve as feedback loops and thus shape subsequent actions and relationships. Practical methods, such as think-aloud protocols, reflective journaling, or real-time tracking of emotional and cognitive states, can capture the lived experience of creativity. These approaches help foreground the often-overlooked, ephemeral aspects of creativity—such as prototypes or improvisations—and their impact on collaboration, reflection, and growth.

These developments require shifting the focus from static outcomes to the fluid, iterative nature of creative work, where each product is not an endpoint but part of an ongoing journey (Richard et al. 2023). For instance, methodologies rooted in process-oriented ethnography or longitudinal case studies could capture how creative actions unfold over time, revealing the interplay between intermediate products and larger creative goals. Similarly, systemic frameworks could emphasize how each creative output serves as a feedback loop, informing and transforming subsequent actions within a network of relationships. By foregrounding the products of the process, we can better understand the ephemeral and adaptive aspects of creativity, such as prototypes, sketches, or improvisations, which hold value in their own right. This perspective also invites us to reconsider the criteria for evaluating creativity, moving beyond traditional measures of originality and utility to include the influence of these intermediary products on collaboration, reflection, and growth. Last but not least, embracing the products of the process can help us appreciate creativity as a dynamic, interconnected phenomenon that evolves continuously through action and interaction.

In the end, creative products absolutely matter. Good grades and entrepreneurial success are important, as are the myriad of Big-C outputs that surround us every day. But where creativity really shines is when it comes to what one might call the products of the process—achieving meaning in life, feeling connected to others, leaving a legacy, being good to other people, and more. Rather than being weighed against similar constructs, such as intelligence or conscientiousness, it is in the products of the process that creativity is on the same playing ground as having children or finding religion.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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