The Relationship between Creativity and Preferred Style of Approaching Conflict Following Procedural Unfairness

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***Abstract*:** The authors investigated the relationships between creative thinking abilities, assessed with *The Battery of Tests for Creative Thinking* (Ana Stoica-Constantin, Mariana Caluschi, 2005), measuring fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, sensitivity to problems, and the personal style of managing conflict, evaluated with *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Instrument Mode* (1977), following unfair treatment; emotional stability was also measured using the *neuroticism* scale from the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire* (1975). The sample of 240 teenagers was divided into a control group and an experimental group; in the experimental condition, procedural unfairness was manipulated through a situation in which participants were subjected to an unannounced evaluation and exposed to negative comparison to a reference out-group. The results revealed that in controlled conditions, highly creative subjects preferred less competitive responses, compared with low-creative subjects; on the other hand, in the experimental condition, after being exposed to the frustrating, unjust situation, the subjects showing higher levels of creative thinking were inclined to equally competitive strategies as their less creative counterparts.
Key words: creativity, style of approaching conflict, perceived unfairness.

The problem

Our empirical study approaches the relationship between creativity and conflict styles, as psychological processes of primary epistemic interest. We tested the hypothesis that the level of the most important creative thinking factors may play a role in the way in which people adjust their self-perceived degree of cooperativeness in procedurally unfair, frustrating and self-threatening situations. In order to achieve this, we combined the individual differences and experimental approach, in an attempt to verify if interpersonal orientation in conflict differed after unfair interventions, in both creative and less creative participants.

In the first part of this article, we discuss the nature of the association between interpersonal conflict and creativity – analyzed from the perspective of the process and person, by discussing a series of hypotheses derived directly or indirectly from the empirical studies and concurrent theoretical models. The intersection of the two multifaceted concepts can be a fertile and interesting area of study. The integration of previous theorizing efforts and the existing empirical attempts to tap into this zone, mainly done indirectly, may have multiple theoretical and applicative benefits.

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Up to this moment, the relationship between creativity - defined either in terms of processes, products or psychological characteristics of creative persons -, and the antecedents, behaviors and consequences associated with conflict situations, has been scarcely formulated into comprehensive theoretical reviews in the literature and with an emphasis on the understanding of conflict (to cite some of the existing work: Fryer, 1998; Gruber, 2000; Hojbotă & Constantin, in press); for instance, both Fryer's and Gruber's integrative models are published in volumes dedicated to the topic of conflicts and conflict resolution.

What is the impact of conflicts on creativity? Recent literature tends to emphasize the idea that divergent thinking and, more broadly, creativity is sensitive to contextual factors. Conflict is one of the factors that recently have received much attention. Researchers have been mostly curious and busy with finding out what beneficial influences of conflicts on the mindsets and creative outputs of individuals are and, more recently and with a greater interest for practitioners, of groups. While psychoanalysts considered conflict, especially inner conflicts (Freud, 1910), but also those located in the social environment (Rank, 1932), as the primary source of the need for self-expression and differentiation, more recent models consider the tension between the old and the new as inherent to the definition of creative acts (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995).

Recent data offer interesting, but sometimes conflicting results, suggesting a wide range of mediating variables that should be taken into account when analyzing the subject. For instance, some studies suggest that conflict positively influences creative performance in individuals and teams, but only if they are restricted to task-related issues (clarifying goals, negotiating solutions, planning, implementation of solution), not "spilling-over" from the relational domain (Beersma & De Dreu 2005; Jehn, 1995; Nemeth, Personnaz, Personnaz, & Goncalo, 2004; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Pelled, 1996; Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Tjosvold, 1985; West, 2002). The negative affect embedded in relational conflicts is suspected to invade and debilitate the motivation and efficiency of groups.

Some researchers interpret these results through the lenses of social influence, suspecting that disagreements reduce the risks of conformity (De Dreu & West, 2001; Sheldon, 1995, 1999). In the same time, a high level of inquisitiveness and epistemic motivation allows negotiators to be less biased and in the same time, more creative (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). On the other hand, a series of studies have uncovered the side effects of conflicts or mediated influences on mindsets and efficiency of processing. Bar-Tal, Kruglanski, and Klar (1989) depicts that conflict situations induce informational fixedness, reducing the thoughtfulness of the parts, freezing their epistemic explorations and keeping them in the conflict schema. Also, Carnevale and Probst (1998) showed that competitive mental sets lead to rigidity, reduced the complexity and novelty of ideas; in contrast, the same study states that subjects in cooperative situations tend to prefer integrative solutions. However, a meta-analysis on the topic (Hulsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009)

suggests that the results of the studies on the relationship between conflict and creativity are mainly inconclusive.

A related issue concerning the relationship between affectivity and creativity, has generated various theoretical conceptualizations and intensive empirical approaches (as illustrated in Averill, 2005; De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008; Kaufmann, 2003). If research on mood and creativity initially insisted on the benefits of positive affectivity on finding divergent solutions (Isen, 1987), some studies suggest that not only positive, but also negative moods sometimes promote superior creative expression (Gasper, 2003; Mraz & Runco, 1994; Verhaegen, Joorman & Kahn, 2005). Other investigations suggest that creative achievers tend to manifest difficulties in down-regulating negative affect and may even suffer from chronic affective disorders (Andreasen, 1987; Jamison, 1989; Ludwig, 1992; Richards, 1993; Schuldberg, 2001). Or, conflicts are usually infused with negative affect, stemming from the divergence of representations, beliefs and expectations and the acknowledgment that these incompatibilities already are or may be translated into interpersonal frictions, ranging from diffused tensions to overt hostility.

And inversely, does creativity influence conflicts? Correlational studies relating conflict and creative traits or products suggest that highly creative individuals tend to exhibit low agreeableness: they are independent, dominant, arrogant, hostile, self-sufficient and impulsive (Feist, 1998, 1999; Hall & MacKinnon, 1969; Hammer, 1984). Kennon Sheldon develops that idea in the following explanation: "In order to develop and market their new ideas, individuals must often be willing to diverge strongly from group norms and accepted behavior, risking alienation and potentially drawing the group's wrath" (Sheldon, 1999, pp. 342-343).

Another group of studies suggests another way to interpret the relationship between creativity and conflict, speculating on a more dark side of creativity that extends beyond the intrapersonal domain to moral behavior and manifests mainly in conflict situations (Sternberg, 2010). This side is reflected in the tendency towards dishonesty, since creative individuals are presumably better at finding ad-hoc justifications for unethical acts; they can easily extract and connect data in a manner in which less creative people are not accustomed to (Ayal & Gino, 2011; Gino & Ariely, 2011; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008).

The complicated relationship between creativity and conflict may also reside in the age, experience and social competences of the actors. In an interesting experimental design described in Gruber (2000), the author attempted to compare the patterns of collaboration between groups of adults and adolescents in generating syntheses of different points of view, by giving each member of dyads a different image that represented the projections of the same object on a wall. The task was inspired by Plato's Myth of the Cave and was given with three types of instructions: (1) in the cooperative condition, subjects were encouraged to work together, as their performance would be evaluated as a whole; (2) in the

individualistic conditions, subjects were instructed to share the necessary information and then work on their own, and (3) in the neutral condition, subjects weren't given any instructions. The research indicated that adults tend to be cooperative in all experimental conditions, suggesting that these kinds of situations naturally evoke cooperation; the results suggests that adolescents tend to focus on their own viewpoint, less attentive to the suggestions and ideas of their partners and have more rigid approaches.

The empirical results converge towards the conclusion that adolescence and adulthood differ in the experiences and skills that may help creative synthesis through problem solving. Moral socialization and development are still not fully attained, perspective taking, empathy and social problem solving may be still lacking depth. Although some researchers show that it increases along with age (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991), in adolescence, social value orientation is not entirely developed into a dominant style, either prosocial, individualistic, or competitive.

The present research

The goal of this study was to determine if threatening the self through collective negative appraisals influences the momentary attitudes in conflict, in a 2 X 2 quasi-experimental design (creative thinking scores - low vs. high, and frustration vs. control group). We chose to explore this relation on adolescent participants, whom we suspected that, in comparison to adults, would be less biased by expertise, experience with social interactions and a stable preference for certain styles of interpersonal negotiation. We suspect adolescents to be less equipped for cooperation and constructive resolution of conflict situations. They own less crystallized preferences and styles of behaving in conflict situations, and also, may be less sensitive to organizational or broader cultural norms that value specific responses to conflict.

Our hypothesis was the following: creative subjects who encountered an unfair situation would show less collaborative conflict-related behaviors and prefer more competitive responses; we did not expect this pattern in the case of their less creative counterparts. In other words, we expected more variability in the responses of the more "creative" group in comparison to the less creative across the two conditions. Experienced conflict and induced frustration would influence the self-reported reactions in conflict situations. In line with the conclusions of the studies described in the first part of the article, we hypothesized that creative individuals should prefer actions that would restore their sense of self-affirmation and autonomy over other potentially rewarding experiences, such as those pertaining to affiliation motives. Mistreatment manifested as inferiority inter-group comparisons and perceived procedural unfairness is expected to influence the self-reported reactions to conflict situations, as it affects individuals' self-worth (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and typically induces frustration (Tiedens & Leach, 2004) or other

reactive affective experiences, such as righteous emotions (e.g. righteous anger or indignation, described by Rozin, Lowery, Imada & Haidt, 1999), anger or Schadenfreude, emotions that are seen as a specific form of psychological negotiations of inter-group relations (Leach & Spears, 2008).

Method

Participants.

The participants consisted of 240 high-school students aged between 16 and 19, 150 of them female (62.5%). The subjects participated in the study during their school hours, in groups of 20 to 30.

Materials

Creative potential measures. Creativity was assessed with the *Creative thinking tests battery* (Ana Stoica-Constantin & Mariana Caluschi, 2005), comprised of five tasks that measure fluency, flexibility, originality, problem sensitivity and elaboration. Due to time limitations, there were only 3 tasks used in this research, the unusual uses tasks (named "The cane"), the invention task (named "The club of ingenious people") and the drawing task ("The semi-discus"). The tasks were timed, measured by means of paper-and-pencil, and provided the following five types of scores: *fluency* (the number of ideas or solutions generated), *flexibility* (the different numbers of categories generated or types of ideas or solutions), *originality* (the number of unique ideas or solutions or statistical infrequency of the responses), *elaboration* (the extent to which details were used in the task resolution, revealing rich perceptual and representational resources) and *sensitivity to problems* (the tendency to discover creative problems, to spontaneously observe the imperfections, limitations in different situations and be able to come up with ideas of how to improve them). An overall creativity score was subtracted from all these measures. The battery provides a standardized operational definition of creativity (i.e. fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, and sensitivity to problems), allowing for the creative process to be assessed as a research variable[3].

[3] *Psychometric qualities of the creative thinking battery*: the inter-rater reliability, tested with experts, suggested that the scale is appropriate for assessing creative potential. Reliability reflected by internal homogeneity, the inter-correlations between the factors measured by the battery indicated high associations between flexibility and fluency on the one hand, and flexibility and originality, on the other; smaller correlations were observed between fluency and originality. Test-retest reliability showed satisfactory levels, the values exceeding .80 for the fluency and flexibility measures, and .70 for originality and elaboration. Convergent validity with parallel measures of creative thinking abilities indicated acceptable values (ranging from .70 to .73 for fluency; from .60 to .69 for flexibility, and from .62 to .68 for originality). Criterion validity is also acceptable, the

Neuroticism. The participants completed the Neuroticism scale form the Eysenck Personality Inventory - EPI (Eysenck, 1975, adapted on Romanian population by Gulian and Andriescu, 1975). The scale measures general emotional reactivity and a tendency towards emotional exhaustion, with 24 items on a dichotomous (*Yes/No*) response scale. The reason we included this scale in the study is the fact we expected neurotics to respond in a contentious, more abrasive manner in conflict situations.

Conflict styles. In a second session, participants were administered the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI, 1977). TKI is built on Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (1964) and measures the typical behavior or preferences of individuals in conflict situations, on two dimensions: assertiveness - the degree to which the persons search to satisfy their own interests and cooperation – the disposition of the individual towards meeting the other person's concerns. The intersection of the two coordinates generates five specific modes or styles of approaching conflict, paralleling those of Blake and Mouton: *competing* (low cooperativeness, high assertiveness), *collaborating* (high cooperativeness, high assertiveness), *avoiding* (low assertiveness, low cooperativeness), *accommodating* (low assertiveness, high cooperativeness), and *compromising* (average assertiveness and average cooperativeness).

Procedure

In the first phase of the study, the participants completed the demographic data, the neuroticism measure from the Eysenck Personality Inventory and the creative thinking measure. A few days after completing the personality measures and divergent thinking tasks, which required a short time for completion, the adolescents completed the TKI questionnaire that assessed individual differences regarding their preferred conflict styles. The experimenters administered the measure in the absence of teachers. Prior to the application, the experimental procedure was introduced to approximately half of the participants (N=126), the rest of the participants were assigned to the control group (N=114). The groups of the participants were randomly assigned to the experimental condition. The procedure for the experimental condition, designed to provoke procedural unfairness, was the following: the adolescents received an unannounced test from previous courses and then their performance was negatively contrasted to other classes from the school.

After this manipulation, they were administered the scale measuring the conflict preferences. After the completion of the research procedure, the protocols were gathered, the participants were probed for suspicion and thanked for their participation as well as thoroughly debriefed. The debriefing procedure made sure,

battery showing significant correlations with indicators of creative achievement, with self-reported and hetero-evaluated creativity (Stoica-Constantin & Caluschi, 2005).

in a supportive manner, that the aims and purpose of the study was clear to each participant. We carefully informed the participants of the deception involved in the procedure, by telling them that the study concerned their reaction to the frustrating feedback. During the debriefing, special attention was directed to the participants in the ego-threat condition, to ensure that they understood that their class was randomly selected and assigned to the condition. Finally, the experimenter asked the participants in this condition if they had any lingering doubts about the study and its procedure and probed them to see how they were feeling, the debriefing discussion continuing until all participants appeared to understand the procedure and ventilated the negative affects. The research design is 2x2, with creative level as the first inter-group variable and the experimental procedure as the other variable.

Results

Associations between conflict variables, creative measures and neuroticism

Before the discussion of the hypothesis, we briefly presented the Pearson (and Spearman, for the variables that were not normally distributed) correlation coefficients that reflect the associations between the variables included in the study. As can be seen in table 1, creative thinking correlated negatively with the *competing conflict* style (r=-.132, p<.05); neuroticism positively correlated with the *accommodating* (r=.159, p<.05) and *compromising* (r=.277, p<.01) styles and negatively with the *competing* (r=-.393, p<.01) and *avoiding styles* (r=-.133, p<.05). As expected, *neuroticism* correlated with styles that exhibit average to low levels of assertiveness.

Regarding the scores on each characteristic measured by the task, only two of the five styles showed significant correlations: overall, *competing conflict mode* negatively correlated with *originality* (r=-.225, p<.01), *flexibility* (r=-.223, p<.05), *fluency* (r=-.235, p<.01), and *sensitivity to problems* (r=-.173, p<.01). The *avoiding style* positively correlated with originality (r=-.159, p<.05). The more creative an individual is, the less competitive are his/her preferred self-reported conflict strategies.

Table 1. *Relationships between the neuroticism, TKI scores and total creativity scores*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Competing TKI	-					
2.Collaborating TKI	-.344**	-				
3. Accommodating TKI	-.304**	-.322**	-			
4. Avoiding TKI	-.334	-.165*	-.023	-		
5.Compomising TKI	-.075	-.123*	-.403**	-.307**	-	
6. Creative thinking	-.132*	-.024	.019	.121	.011	-
7. Neuroticism EPI	-.356**	.110	.280**	-.182*	.127*	.064

Note: N=240, *p<0,05, **p<0,01

Links between Cognitive Creative Traits and Conflict Mode

As we already mentioned, data were analyzed in a 2 (level of creative thinking – high and low) x 2 (frustration induced by injustice/ control) analysis of variances. To test our first hypothesis, we developed Anova Univariate with conflict styles, such as a dependent variable, and creative thinking (high, low) as independent variable. The results indicated no significant interaction effect between creativity and induced frustration ($F_{(1.239)}$=1.94, p=.165).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for the 4 experimental conditions*

Experimental condition		N	Mean and standard deviations of the TKI scores				
			competing	collaborating	compromising	avoiding	accommodating
control	*low creativity*	41	.601 (.121)	.561 (.143)	.337 (.129)	.504 (.094)	.495 (.122)
	high creativity	73	.553 (.118)	.554 (.118)	.355 (.129)	.513 (.101)	.522 (.114)
frustration	*low creativity*	64	.574 (.121)	.571 (.136)	.362 (.144)	.493 (.105)	.498 (.108)
	high creativity	62	.571 (.127)	.590 (.111)	.330 (.128)	.506 (.103)	.501 (.122)
Total		240	0,571 (.122)	.569 (.126)	.347 (.133)	.504 (.101)	.503 (.116)

Significant differences between scores on the TKI for the experimental groups based on their creativity level were analyzed with independent t tests (table 2). In the no-frustration condition, a significant difference between creative subjects and less creative regarding the scores on the competing mode was observed: t(112)=2.059, p=.042. The less creative participants had significantly higher scores (M=0.60, SD=.121) than the highly creative ones (M=0.55, SD=.118). In the frustration condition, the differences between the scores on the competitive style for the respondents with highly creative responses (M=0.574, SD=.121) and those with less creative responses (M=0.571, SD=.127) were not significant, t(124)=.134, p=.894. In other words, if in regular circumstances creative individuals are inclined towards low levels of competitiveness, frustrating situations orient creative individuals towards levels of competing conflict attitudes similar to their less creative counterparts. We also want to mention that there were no statistically significant differences between the high and low scorers on the divergent thinking tasks regarding the self-reported answers on the scales measuring the collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating styles.

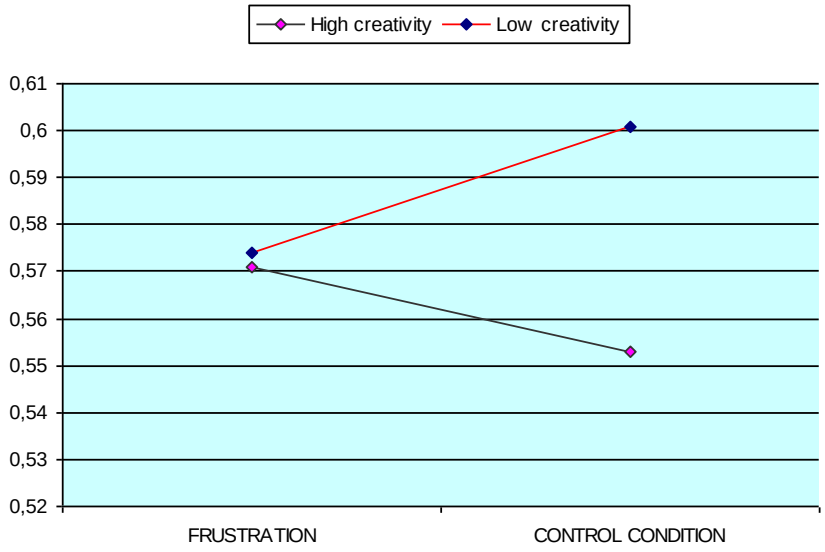

Figure 1**:** *The scores for competing style preference in the experimental and control conditions of highly creative and low creative subjects*

Results show an interesting difference between creative and less creative students within the frustration condition: while the scores on the competing style scale were significantly lower for the creative subjects in the control condition, in the experimental condition, creative individuals showed similar concern for the other's and own outcome as their less creative counterparts (Figure 1). In other words, while in normal conditions, highly creative subjects exhibit a significantly lower degree of competitiveness, when trust is obliterated (as in the situation when explicit norms were violated and the self-evaluation threatened), they choose more confrontational responses, to a similar degree as the low scorers on the divergent thinking battery.

Discussion

The results suggest that creative people are more sensitive to emotion induced by conflict situations than less creative people, and tend to give more self-oriented responses. In the same time, some of the results suggest that neurotic tendencies protect against escalation of conflicts and predispose to approaches more oriented towards solutions that would satisfy both parties. Unable to cope effectively with negative emotions, neurotic subjects may be threatened by conflict situations and consequently, more readily discard the tension and anxiety generated by actual or potential disputes with others by accepting a less satisfying agreement.

If creative individuals pertaining to the control group are significantly more cooperative, in the experimental conditions, the highly creative tend to describe themselves as preferring more competitive styles. Frustration-related, righteous emotions presumably elicited by the unfair treatment may temporarily modify the degree of trust and cooperativeness of individuals, and this shift may be obvious in highly creative individuals. These individuals may flexibly select and temporarily adhere to more competitive strategies if the situation is perceived as threatening and therefore, asks for decisiveness or prompt actions, or when individuals feel they have to protect themselves against being taken advantage of by another party. Competition can be conceptualized as a comparative process that provides an occasion for the reconsideration of an undesired or unfair evaluation; the competitiveness exhibited by the participants in our study may be an implicit solicitation for an occasion to reaffirm their challenged abilities and competencies. In other words, our results indicate a leveling effect of situational unfairness on the cooperativeness of divergent thinkers.

Contrary to the common beliefs regarding creative personalities, such as independent and nonconformist thinkers that disregard social norms, pressures and evaluations, creative people are not immune to evaluative judgments; on the contrary, – as this study suggests - they show more readiness when it comes to claiming their rights and reestablishing their challenged sense of self-worth. These results may partially explain the varying results in the literature concerning the conflict between humanistic tendencies vs. hostile reactions of creative individuals, labeled by Galang (2010) as the paradox of the "prosocial psychopath".

One of the main limits of the study could concern the significance of the creativity score, given the debate in the literature concerning the generalizability of divergent thinking results. The other, concerns the nature of the experimental procedure. Social stimuli are inherently ambiguous and the procedure is sensitive to various situational aspects, such as the performance of the class, the relationship between the teacher and the students, as well as the educational culture that induces a specific response to evaluation. A greater limitation consists in the operationalization of conflict preferences. We chose a self-report measure referring to general responses to conflict situation to eliminate the influence of self-efficacy and actual competence of the subjects in approaching conflicts.

Another ignored class of information that would be useful refers to the types and consequences of attributions in achievement domains of the participants and the latency or flexibility of the self-reported preferences after the frustrating event. We limited our measurements regarding positioning in conflict to self-report because our primary interest was to capture a cognitive orientation and a naturalistic experiment would be hard to manage. More data, from controlled studies, using questionnaires concerning interpersonal dynamics related to specific tasks and observational data examining communication patterns, collaborative work and management of conflict in real dyads and groups would be a more promising avenue for research and provide firmer conclusions. Also, a more

careful control of the manipulation procedure through detailed measures of affect would clarify the mediating or moderating role of affect and affective traits in this relationship.

An important point to discuss is the answer to the question: are differences in conflict styles stable, or are they situational, context–dependent? In managing reactions to everyday situations, we chose habitual patterns of behavior, those with which we feel most comfortable; in exceptional situations, such as stressful or frustrating episodes, we tend to adjust by choosing the style that best suits the current demands. In conclusion, it is important to note that we treat the notion of style as an adaptable, flexible reaction to situations, as opposed to more typological conceptualizations. Citing Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Cropley (1997), who previously defined creativity as a "bundle of paradoxes", Haller and Courvoisier (2010) suggested in a recent article that highly creative individuals display more complex personality profiles. More specifically, they are able to "fluctuate between apparently contradictory poles, such as selfishness versus altruism" (Haller & Courvoisier, 2010, p. 150) and flexibly adjustment to situational demands, even if this means extreme shifts in behavioral responses; consistency or uncompromising adherence to a defined set of behavioral responses may not be an important goal or value for the highly creative.

The reaction suggested by these results may also be informative because of a possible explanation that illuminates the way in which the „cartesian anxiety" or ambivalence of teachers towards creativity /creative types or pupils is perpetuated in classrooms. Cartesian anxiety refers to the ambivalence of teachers towards exhibiting creative behaviors in class: most of the teachers value the trait, but tend to discourage it in specific environments and situations, because of the disruptive potential implicitly attached to the representation of their authors (Karwowski, 2010; Rudowicz, Tokarz, & Beauvale, 2009). Creativity also tends to be devalued in organizational contexts, by a negative implicit association between the schema of leadership, of managerial skills and creative expression (Mueller, Goncalo, & Kamdar, 2010). Academic evaluations are, by their inherent nature, ambiguous and may generate frustration, feelings of inequity and therefore, the prompt and highly assertive reaction of the "creative" may contribute to the ambivalence of the educators towards them.

In particular, these results highlight the importance of cognitive characteristics associated with creativity when it comes to managing dispositional reactions to conflicts. They may reflect the way the predisposition to creative thinking may also generate competitive ways of thinking in certain situations, a conclusion that remains to be verified on experimental, naturalistic designs. In advancing new ideas, especially in hostile, reluctant contexts, the appeal to competitive strategies may 'cut in both ways': on one hand, by protecting the survival chance of the idea, but on the other hand, compromising the social approval of its proponent. Further empirical tests could investigate the role of specific coping strategies, of moral emotions, personal values and other potentially

significant variables in the relationship between managing interpersonal conflict and creative potential, in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

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