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## **From improvisation to taming uncertainty: creative responses to different levels of risk and formalization**

### Abstract

The paper will argue that, as both social and natural sciences shift towards a stress on the conceptual centrality of contingency and context-dependency, accounts of different forms of creativity should incorporate the permanent reality of risk and of multiple relationships between the formal and the informal (Misztal 2000). The concept of 'creativity' is too often taken to be a single unproblematic unity but in fact, I will claim, there are at least nine kinds associated with a couple of variables - risk and formality. These two axes, the level of risk and to the nature of the relationship between formality and informality, generate a matrix with nine possible forms of creativity. I argue that the perception of a situation as a 'normal' assists cooperative relations because the combination of a balance between formality and informality and a low level of risk ensures that all participants in complex innovative endeavours have good reasons to trust each other. I suggest that normality, seen from this perspective, secures both the short-term flexibility and the long-term consistency which together facilitate creativity.

In the history of science and the sociology of knowledge, the notion of 'normal' has its most prominent example in Kuhn's notion of 'normal science' – a term that refers to the kind of science in which an intellectual paradigm for research is taken for granted and which 'does not aim at novelties of fact or theory and, when successful,

finds none' (1969: 52). In this paper, however, I want to redefine the concept of 'normality' with the help of some ideas borrowed from the approach to interaction order taken by Erving Goffman. For Goffman, the collective sense of what is normal social life is structured by conformity and rebellion and is seen as a collective achievement to which we all contribute by following the rules for interaction. A situation is perceived as 'normal' when participants are assured that nothing around them is out of the ordinary and, in the absence of anything unusual and unforeseen, they can therefore feel safe and at ease (Goffman 1974). When systems start to lose their coherence and incorporate risk and unpredictability, attempts are then undertaken to reduce those risks and to restore the predictability without which a state of 'permanent uncertainty' looms (Luhmann 1979). 'Normal order' is associated with both a feeling of comfort, due to the low risk environment, and a sense of having prospects for the future, due to the predictability of order embedded in a balanced relationship between the formal and the informal. Since people manufacture normality as they come to terms with the degree of danger and adjust to the level of predictability, creativity can be seen as an essential element in people's actions when at ease and when they take action to escape danger. 'Normal appearances', as an ongoing accomplishment in which people employ tacit and practical knowledge as they go along, are not necessarily based on mutual trust, although they can facilitate its development. Trust, in turn, can reduce the complexity of the system by increasing the 'tolerance of uncertainty' (Luhmann 1979:67).

In the first part of the paper I will describe three forms of creativity which are characterised by the same balance of formality and informality but by different levels of risk (respectively low, medium and high level of risk). The first form, a successful

creative interaction between people who are relatively free from immediate rules and regulations, yet embedded within wider formalized structures which provide them with codes of behaviour and a relatively safe environment, can be described as 'making music together'. This type of creative cooperation is more than merely the process of coordination of human action as it refers to the mutual 'tuning-in' of relationships that are established by the reciprocal 'sharing of the other's flux of experience' (Schutz 1964:173). Creative achievement is accomplished mainly through purposeful work, which indicates a certain degree of mastery of a domain, and is characteristic of science in which discoveries become a formalised part of shared knowledge. Although improvisation occurs in science, it is more common under the condition of a greater informalization and comfort. This second form can be illustrated by such activities as improvisation in jazz, where participants work within a framework of agreement on procedures and outcomes yet avoid too rigidly prescribed scripts (Tilly 2000:723). While science-style creativity typically rests on complex and relatively balanced formal/ informal structures, jazz-style improvisations generally rely on more fragmented and variable social structures and proceed 'through improvised interaction, surprise, incessant error and error correction, alternation between solo and ensemble action, and repeated responses to understandings shared by at least pairs of players' (Tilly 2000:723). The third form of creativity, which is marked by a relative balance between informality and formality and the high level of risk, is a 'taming of chance', or normalization, since it refers to the kind of breaching of the normal registered as 'chance'. The taming of chance - the most successful way of bringing order out of chaos - can be seen as 'the most ideological tool of the twentieth century' (Hacking 1990:169). Efforts to 'tame chance' are expressed in terms of probability, whose laws allow for enumeration and

evaluation in terms of normalcy and deviation from the norm. ‘Throughout the Age of Reason, chance had been called the superstition of the vulgar. ... The rational man, averting his eyes from such things, could cover chaos with a veil of inexorable laws. The world, it was said, might often look haphazard, but only because we do not know the inevitable workings of its inner springs’ (Hacking 1992:1).

In the paper’s second section I will look at formalized institutional frameworks plotted along the risk-comfort axis. I begin by describing the kind of innovative action emerging from conditions of routine which can be called the ‘invisible elbow’ principle (Tilly 1998). This type of episodic innovation is illustrated by the situation in which, not having a hand free to close the door, we use our elbow to slam it, pointing to the varied and constant adjustments we make to correct and improve the unintended consequences of prior actions. At the other end of the spectrum, further along the formalization axis, that is under the condition of risk and formalization, creativity takes on the form of the taming of anxiety. This type of innovative action occurs due to the persistence and accumulation of anomalies which resist assimilation. According to Kuhn (1969), whose account of scientific revolutions relates the decisions to change a given paradigm to the social psychology of the scientific group involved, such a loss of consensus can result in radical change. At the mid-point between these extremes there is a space occupied by what I call ‘charismatic inspiration’ (Weber 1968) where dynamic changes responsible for increasing the system’s capability to react flexibly to internal and external challenges are produced.

In the third section of the paper, I discuss the three types of innovative action which result from attempts to restore normality as people adjust to progressively higher

levels of informality. First, there is the ‘taming of uncertainty’ which is an innovative process occurring under the high level of risk. The taming of uncertainty manifests itself in the expansion of trust systems by bringing irregular events under control, making them predictable and thus reducing the complexity of the system. Second, at the middle of the scale of risk, we can talk about the process of rationalization, which is, according to Weber, one of the main sources of creativity and change. Third, at the end of the spectrum characterised by high levels of both security from risk and informality, innovative actions can best be described as ‘creative insight’ or ‘intuition’. A low level of risk, in combination with a lack of formalization of the rules of conduct, can enhance the chance of insight or intuition and facilitate the type of creativity which unites intense intellectual and emotional involvement. Such creative intuition, which arises from a degree of vagueness (James 1890), can be illustrated by so-called ‘hot groups’. Hot groups are spontaneously emerging groups which are characterised by openness and flexibility in their organizational structures and which generate excitement and intuitive solutions. Although they are rare, their fluid structures and small size, alongside their members’ intense intellectual and emotional involvement, make them very successful (Leavitt and Lipman-Blumen 1995:113).

Finally, I will conclude by arguing that although in practice all forms of creativity may be less clearly distinct than the ideal types presented in my matrix, the identification of its nine types can help to suggest which form may offer an optimal solution for a specific situation.

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