



# Creativity: The Influence of Cultural, Social, and Work Contexts

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**ABSTRACT** The present article aims to answer the question of whether creativity is universal or culture-specific. We develop a conceptual framework that expands the existing knowledge in two ways. First, it distinguishes between the two dimensions of creativity – novelty and usefulness, and their relationship to culture. Second, it clarifies how the social context moderates the relationship between culture and creativity. We focus on the social context where cultural differences are likely to be more salient because of the presence of others, relative to the private work context where no one observes whether a person performs in a normative or a unique way. In addition, we propose that task structure, whether a task is tightly or loosely structured, is an important contextual characteristic that moderates the relationship between culture and creativity. Lastly, we offer several propositions to guide future research.

**KEYWORDS** creativity, culture, novelty, social context, task context, usefulness

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## INTRODUCTION

Is creativity universal or culture-specific? Are different aspects of creativity randomly distributed across cultures or are certain aspects of creativity (idea novelty vs. idea usefulness and appropriateness) more prevalent in some cultures than others? In the present article, we expand the existing theory on culture and creativity by differentiating between the two dimensions of creativity – idea novelty and idea usefulness – and examine the effect of culture on each dimension. Specifically, we develop propositions specifying how the social and task contexts moderate the effect of cultural values on each dimension of creativity.

According to Amabile, creativity is defined as the generation of novel ideas that are useful and appropriate (Amabile, 1982, 1983, 1996). Ideas that are novel but not useful and appropriate cannot be implemented into a new product, technology, process, or service. Thus, creative ideas should incorporate both novelty and usefulness. Creativity tests have distinguished between these two components (Guilford, 1967; Torrance, 1974). Torrance (1974), for example, used four differ-

ent criteria for evaluating creativity: originality, flexibility, fluency, and elaboration, with the later one reflecting the appropriateness of the idea. Creativity also differs from innovation in that the former does not involve the implementation of a novel idea, while the latter involves both the generation of creative ideas (novel and appropriate) and their implementation (Amabile, 1996; Gatignon, Tushman, Smith, & Anderson, 2002).

The desire to create something new and different seems to be universal. Creativity is perceived positively across cultures (Westwood & Low, 2003). Creativity corresponds to basic human needs of exploration (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004), variety (Drolet, 2002; Maddi, Propst, & Feldinger, 1965), autonomy (Amabile, 1996), and uniqueness (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Similarly, the relationship between the personal characteristic of openness to experience and creativity was found to be universal (Heine & Buchtel, 2009).

If the desire to be creative is universal, are all cultures creative in the same way, or is it possible that different cultures give different attention to the novelty vs. the usefulness and appropriateness aspect of creativity? Paletz and Peng (2008) examined the relationship between culture and the two dimensions of creativity – novelty and usefulness. They manipulated the novelty vs. usefulness of a new product, using scenarios, and tested whether culture moderated their perceived importance for creativity and the desire to have a product that is novel or useful. They found Chinese students in their sample valued novelty more than Americans, whereas Americans and Japanese valued usefulness more than the Chinese. Leung and Morris (2010) proposed that this may be explained by the fast growing economy in China, which reflects novelty and willingness to make changes. Yet, this is one of the rare studies that examine the relationship of culture to the novelty and usefulness of creativity, separately. Most research in organizational behavior either measured creativity as one holistic factor (e.g., Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1991), or focused mainly on the novelty aspect of creativity (Eisenberger, Haskins, & Gambilton, 1999; Goncalo & Staw, 2006; Madjar & Oldham, 2006; Zhou & Shalley, 2003).

The distinction between the two components of idea novelty and idea usefulness is necessary for understanding the variation in cultural effects on creativity. We suggest that some cultures may emphasize the novelty of the idea whereas other cultures may emphasize the usefulness and appropriateness of the idea. For example, Westerners score high on openness to experience, which stimulates novel ideas. They are also more extraverted, expressing their ideas more openly than East Asians (Allik & McCrae, 2004). In East Asian cultures, the need to explore receives less emphasis as compared with the need for cognitive closure (Ip, Chen, & Chiu, 2006). Similarly, the need for variety and uniqueness is weaker in East Asian cultures compared with Western cultures (Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Markus, 1999).

Furthermore, cultures differ in their values, which influence what is desirable or undesirable. Cultures that emphasize the values of collectivism and conformity to social norms, and the values of uncertainty avoidance and high power distance, may restrain individuals from expressing their unique ideas and from deviating from the norm (Harzing & Hofstede, 1996; Westwood & Low, 2003). In contrast, cultures that emphasize the values of individualism, low power distance, and low uncertainty avoidance create a cultural environment that supports the expression of one's unique ideas and the exploration of new ways of doing things (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kim & Markus, 1999). Studies with bicultural participants also demonstrated that Western culture supports novelty. Asian-Americans with high bicultural identity generated more novel ideas after exposure to American than to Asian cues (Mok & Morris, 2010).

The literature on cultural values and creativity is relatively limited and the empirical findings are inconsistent and sometimes contradict the theoretical predictions. For example, the Thomson Science Innovation Indicator Country Ratings (2004) (in Brocklehurst, 2005) showed that Japan ranks at the top of the list with regard to the absolute number of patents. Yet, Japan is a highly collectivistic culture, with high power distance, two cultural values that restrain uniqueness and novel ideas.

We argue that the apparent inconsistency is due to the lack of a clear delineation between the novelty and usefulness aspects of creativity. While the desire to create is universal across cultures, different cultures emphasize idea novelty vs. idea usefulness and appropriateness differently. Such differences may be reflected in the novelty and the appropriateness of a patent and whether it can be implemented in the near future or not.

A recent study by Nouri, Erez, Rockstuhl, and Ang (2008) provides preliminary support to our notion that cultures differ in their emphasis on the novelty vs. the usefulness and appropriateness of creativity. In their study, Singaporeans and Israelis obtained similar scores on a creativity test performed individually. Yet, when working on a creativity task in a dyad, Singaporean dyads were less original than Israeli dyads, but elaborated more on each idea to stress its appropriateness compared with Israeli dyads. These findings showed that the context of working in a dyad vs. working alone had a different impact on Israelis and Singaporeans. Singaporeans tend to refrain from generating novel ideas that deviate from the social norms when working in a dyad vs. when working alone.

To further understand the differential effects of culture on the generation of novel ideas vs. elaborating on their usefulness, we propose a theoretical framework which explains how certain cultural values enhance the novelty of ideas whereas others enhance the elaboration on its usefulness or appropriateness. Furthermore, we identify the social context which magnifies such cultural differences on creative performance vs. a context that minimizes such cultural differences.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL VALUES, SOCIAL AND TASK CONTEXTS, AND CREATIVITY DIMENSIONS

Our conceptual framework is divided into two parts. First, we generate propositions on the main effects of three cultural values on the importance attached to the novelty and appropriateness aspects of an idea: collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Erez, 2010; Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Harzing & Hofstede, 1996). Second, we propose that the cultural variation in creativity will be moderated by the social and task contexts. We expect more cultural variation in generating novel ideas vs. elaborating on their usefulness and appropriateness in social contexts that prime cultural values, such as working in the presence of peers or supervisors. We expect less cultural variation in creative performance under culturally neutral work contexts, such as working alone and privately. We explain these relationships below and offer propositions to guide future research. Figure 1 is an overall framework showing the relationship among cultural values, social contexts, and the two dimensions of creativity.

### The Relationship between Cultural Values and Creativity Dimensions

According to Amabile (1996), the major antecedents of creativity are: (i) domain-relevant skills; (ii) mental processes of breaking perceptual and habitual sets; (iii) task motivation; and (iv) context, namely the specific situation and social environment. We assume that the skills and mental processes to be creative are normally distributed across cultures. Yet, task motivation and social context may vary across cultures, and cultural values such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance may restrain individuals from generating novel ideas, but may in contrast direct them to emphasize the usefulness and appropriateness of their ideas.

Figure 1. The moderating effects of the social and task contexts on the relationship between culture and creativity

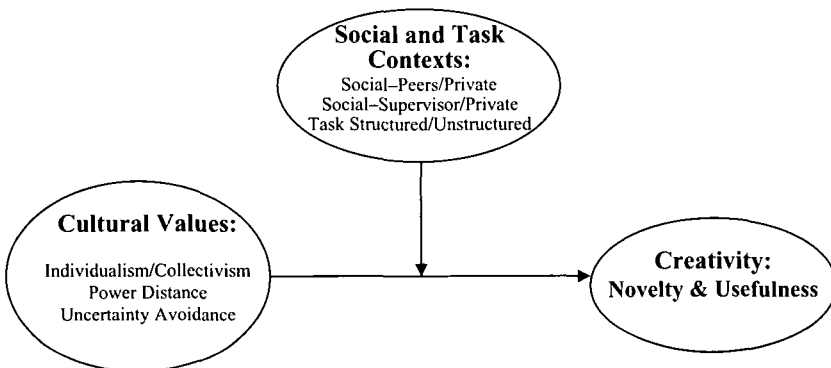
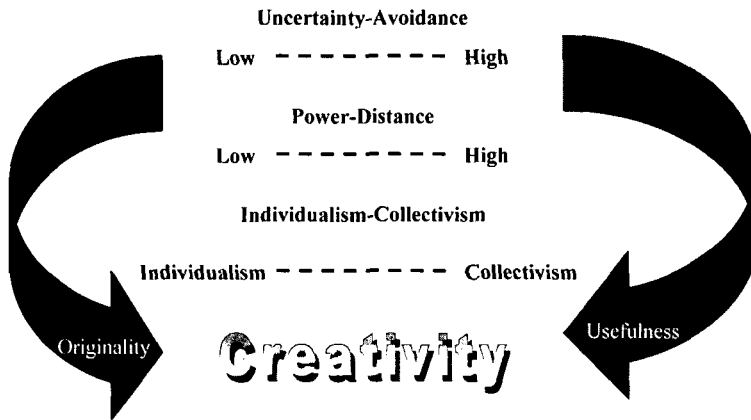


Figure 2. The relationship between cultural values and creativity dimensions



Values are conceptual representations of needs and, as such, are part of the volitional system (Erez & Earley, 1993). In addition, values represent societal and cultural demands (Rokeach, 1973). Different priorities may be placed on similar needs in different cultures, as guided by the cultural values nurtured through the socialization processes.

To be novel, people should break existing frames and use divergent thinking to create new associations between concepts (Guilford, 1967). In contrast, to make sure that an idea is useful and appropriate, people should focus on convergent thinking, conform to rules, and be attentive to detail.

The need to express uniqueness and the need to conform to rules and pay attention to detail seem to be shaped by the three cultural values of collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Harzing & Hofstede, 1996; Jones & Davis, 2000). Figure 2 is a graphical representation of the relationship between these cultural values and the two components of creativity – novelty and usefulness.

*Individualism/collectivism and creativity.* The literature clearly suggests that culture influences creativity. Schwartz's (1992) *self-direction* value was positively related to creativity (Dollinger, Burke, & Gump, 2007; Kasof, Chen, Himsel, & Greenberger, 2007). In contrast, the values of *tradition*, *security*, and *conformity* were negatively related to creativity (Dollinger et al., 2007; Kasof et al., 2007). Self-direction corresponds to the value of individualism whereas tradition, security, and conformity correspond to collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, & Javidan, 2004). Individualism emphasizes uniqueness, autonomy, independence, and self-initiative, all important to novelty (Jones & Davis, 2000). In contrast, collectivism emphasizes conformity to the group, consensus, and interdependence, all restraining the generation of unique ideas and self-expression (Brewer & Chen, 2007).

However, cultural values that emphasize group conformity and consensus may enhance elaboration on the usefulness and appropriateness of ideas, so as to assure their acceptance by others and their adherence to social norms.

The above studies suggest that individualism and collectivism influence creativity in different ways. While individualism encourages idea novelty, collectivism stresses the elaboration on the usefulness and appropriateness of an idea to ensure social acceptance and compliance with social norms. Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 1a: Individuals in individualistic cultures will demonstrate a higher level of novelty in idea generation than will individuals in collectivistic cultures.*

*Proposition 1b: Individuals in collectivistic cultures will elaborate more on the usefulness and appropriateness of their new ideas compared with individuals in individualistic cultures.*

*Power distance and creativity.* Power distance reflects the extent to which power is equally or differentially distributed among members of a society (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). High power distance reflects the acceptance of inequality in the social hierarchy and control of the less powerful by the more powerful (Hofstede, 2001). Accordingly, one should comply with his or her superiors and accept their authority. Low power distance reflects the value of equality and the belief that 'all men are created equal'. In hierarchical societies, the relationship between managers and subordinates is based on compliance and discipline. In societies with low power distance, the leadership style is of empowerment, encouraging employees to be autonomous, take responsibility, participate in decision making, and voice their opinions and ideas (Eylon & Au, 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2003).

Subordinates in societies high on power distance are accustomed to depending on their supervisors for direction and decision making (House et al., 2004) and communication in high power distance cultures is mostly top down (Javidan & House, 2001). Therefore, followers are not socialized to think independently and generate their own solutions to problems. If asked for their ideas on how to solve a problem, followers are likely to conform to the existing rules and procedures set and respected by their superiors, rather than breaking the rules. Their fear of deviating from existing norms and being punished for it (Hofstede, 2001) may lead followers to stress the appropriateness of their idea, to assure alignment with the existing order and acceptance of their ideas by their superiors. In contrast, people in societies low on power distance are not afraid to freely voice their ideas and they feel less obliged to elaborate on the ideas in order to have it accepted by their superiors. Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 2a: Individuals in low power distance cultures will demonstrate a higher level of novelty in idea generation than will individuals in high power distance cultures.*

*Proposition 2b: Individuals in high power distance cultures will demonstrate a higher level of elaboration on the usefulness and appropriateness of their new ideas than will individuals in low power distance cultures.*

*Uncertainty avoidance and creativity.* Uncertainty avoidance pertains to the level of stress that is experienced by individuals when facing the unknown (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004). In a society where tolerance for ambiguity is low, rules and strict procedures are maintained in order to reduce ambiguity. However, rigidity in rules and standards restricts improvisation and novelty. On the other hand, low uncertainty avoidance encourages exploration and experimentation. Yet, the lack of clear standards and procedures may make task implementation difficult. Low uncertainty avoidance encourages exploration, which is necessary for generating novel ideas, whereas high uncertainty avoidance hinders exploration and constrains the novelty aspect of creativity.

Research has shown support for the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and creativity. For example, high tolerance for uncertainty is associated with risk-taking, tolerance for mistakes, and low bureaucracy, which encourage exploration and novel ideas (Cummings, 1965; Miron, Erez, & Naveh, 2004; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). In contrast, a bureaucratic culture restricts deviations from normative behaviors (Jansen, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006; Weick, 1979).

High uncertainty avoidance reflects a *tight* culture where norms are expressed very clearly and unambiguously, and severe sanctions are imposed on those who deviate from the norms. In contrast, lower uncertainty avoidance reflects a *loose* culture where norms are expressed through a wide variety of alternative channels, tolerating deviant behaviors and errors (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006; Peltó, 1968; Triandis, 1989). Key outcomes associated with tightness include order and efficiency, conformity, routine, inertia, and stability, all supporting ideas which appropriately fit in with the norms. In contrast, key outcomes associated with looseness include acceptance of diversity, deviation from the rules, and openness to change, which enhances exploration and novelty (Gelfand et al., 2006). Based on the research literature and further conceptual clarifications, we propose:

*Proposition 3a: Individuals in low uncertainty avoidance cultures will demonstrate a higher level of novelty in idea generation than will individuals in high uncertainty avoidance cultures.*

*Proposition 3b: Individuals in high uncertainty avoidance cultures will demonstrate a higher level of elaboration on the usefulness and appropriateness of their new ideas than will individuals in low uncertainty avoidance culture.*

### **The Relationship between Cultural Values, Social and Task Contexts, and Creativity Dimensions**

The social context in which a creative task is performed is important for creative accomplishment. Zhou & Su (2010) have suggested the social context as one of the major missing concepts in the study of culture and creativity. The social context brings into salience the socio-cultural values which regulate social behaviors. Therefore, in this context cultural differences are amplified, as compared with a private context in which the influence of cultural values is neutralized.

According to the social facilitation theory (Sanders, 1981), the presence of others influences individual performance by increasing generalized arousal, resulting in the enhancement of simple or well-learned routine tasks and impairment of complex or unlearned tasks. Zajonc (1965) argued that the arousal state underlying social facilitation is physical, primitive, and unlearned. Others claimed that the arousal state occurs because others who are present in the situation are viewed as evaluators of one's behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1981). The presence of others not only enhances motivation when the focal person feels confident by having the necessary resources to cope with the situation, but it can also increase feelings of perceived threats when the focal person feels incompetent because of insufficient resources to meet the demands (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Salomon, 1999; Weiss & Miller, 1971).

We propose that the social vs. the private context augments the effect of culture on the tendency to focus on the novelty or the appropriateness of ideas. In the next section we examine the moderating effect of three contexts on the culture–creativity relationship: the social context of the presence of peers vs. the private context of working alone, the social context of the presence of superiors vs. the private context, and the task context of high vs. low task structure. The moderating effect of these three social and task contexts is summarized in Table 1 and is illustrated in Figure 3.

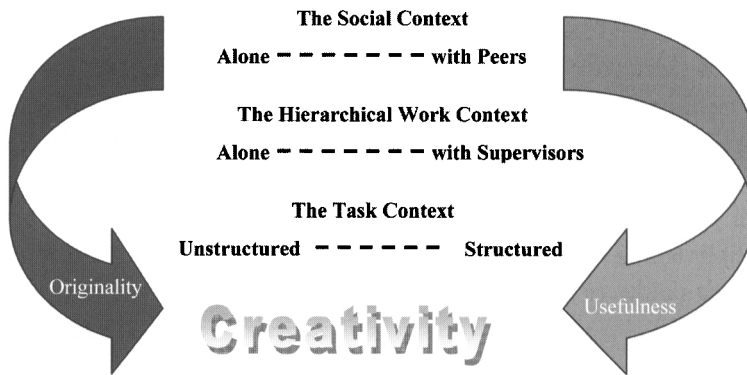
We suggest that the social context strengthens the influence of cultural values on a person's actions. A recent study demonstrated that individuals' perceptions of the views of people around them influenced their judgment more than their own personal values (Zou, Tam, Morris, Lee, Lau, & Chiu, 2009). In this study, American and Polish students did not differ in their level of individualism–collectivism as a personal value. Yet, Americans perceived other people in their society to be more individualistic, whereas Poles perceived others in their society to be more collectivistic. The perceived consensus about the dominant values in the society influenced their judgment more than their own personal values.



Table 1. Social context, cultural values, and individual needs

<i>Social context</i>	<i>Implication for the individual</i>	<i>Related cultural value</i>	<i>Related individual needs</i>
Social	Alone vs. in the presence of peers	Individualism/collectivism	Conformity vs. uniqueness
Hierarchical	Alone vs. in the presence of a supervisor	Power distance	Embeddedness vs. autonomy
Task structure	Working in weak vs. strong task structure	Uncertainty avoidance	Need for cognitive closure vs. need for exploration

Figure 3. The relationship between social and task contexts and creativity dimensions



Similarly, agreeableness and extraversion affected negotiations for Americans, but not for Chinese (Liu, Friedman, & Chi, 2005). The authors explained: ‘This is not to say there are no individual differences in extraversion and agreeableness among Chinese people. Chinese who are extravert are probably more talkative and outgoing than introvert Chinese. However, within the sphere of the Chinese collectivist culture, those personality dimensions are not likely to produce significant differences in the already culturally dictated high level of social engagement’ (Liu et al., 2005: 229).

*The social context: the presence of peers.* Sensitivity to the social context may vary across cultures. Among East Asians, there is a greater sensitivity to the social context compared with Americans (Morris & Peng, 1994). Moreover, concern with maintaining ‘face’ leads East Asians to adhere to social norms, whereas concern with enhancing self-esteem leads Westerners to adhere to their own internal standards (Heine, Takemoto, Moskalkenko, Lasaleta, & Henrich, 2008). East Asians are also more likely to recall memories of themselves from a third-person perspective (Cohen & Gunz, 2002). This implies that East Asians pay closer attention to the

perspective of others and adjust their behaviors accordingly, compared with Westerners. These cultural differences lead us to suggest that the presence of peers will have different effects on the creative performance of members of different cultures and that such differences will be attenuated in a private context, which neutralizes the influence of cultural values.

Individuals need to balance the tension between their need to distinguish themselves from others and be unique individuals, and their willingness to belong to others and assimilate (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The tipping point depends on whether or not being unique is considered to violate social norms, resulting in isolation and disapproval by others (Lynn & Harris, 1997). Members of individualistic cultures hold values that support the expression of uniqueness and distinctiveness from others. In contrast, members of collectivistic cultures hold values that emphasize similarity with their peers. Chinese respondents, for example, rated a product advertised by emphasizing assimilation needs as more favourable, whereas Americans preferred a product advertised by stressing differentiation needs (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001).

In the presence of others, assimilation needs trigger the motivation to refrain from deviation and to seek similarity and harmony. Thus, assimilation needs increase the likelihood of elaborating on the usefulness and appropriateness of new ideas to make them acceptable to others and inhibit the expression of original and non-conventional ideas that differentiate a person from the group. In contrast, differentiation needs activate the motivation to be unique and to generate original and novel ideas.

Assimilation vs. differentiation needs are related to the values of collectivism vs. individualism (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Therefore, we expect to see more novelty among individualists than among collectivists and more elaboration among collectivists than among individualists when working in the presence of peers.

On the other hand, in a private setting without peers, social and cultural identities are less activated and thus cross-cultural differences in self-expression may diminish. Therefore, the degree to which East Asians, for example, refrain from expressing their unique ideas would depend on whether the situation makes social norms salient, such as performing a task in the presence of others, as opposed to performing the task privately. Based on the above discussion, we propose:

*Proposition 4: Differences between members of collectivistic and individualistic cultures in focusing on the novelty of creative ideas vs. elaborating on their usefulness will be moderated by the social context:*

*a. Individuals from individualistic cultures will demonstrate significantly higher levels of novelty compared with individuals from collectivistic cultures when working in the presence of peers; less differences are expected when working alone and privately.*

*b. Individuals from collectivistic cultures will demonstrate significantly higher levels of appropriateness and usefulness compared with individuals from individualistic cultures when working in the presence of peers; less differences are expected when working alone and privately.*

*The socio-hierarchical context.* The boss–subordinate relationships are part of the social context. Therefore, the presence of a boss when performing a creative task may influence subordinates' level of self-expression. In cultures of high power distance subordinates refrain from freely voicing their ideas, waiting to be guided by their boss and follow orders. In contrast, in low power distance cultures subordinates feel free to express their unique ideas and prove their competence (Hofstede, 2001; Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van der Vegt, 2005). Supervisors in high power distance cultures are more controlling than informational. In contrast, supervisors in low power distance cultures are more informational than controlling (George & Zhou, 2001; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Yet, in the East, unlike in the West, autocratic leaders may actually direct employees to be creative resulting in greater creativity (Zhou & Su, 2010). The presence of a supervisor primes the cultural value of power distance. People in high power distance cultures are afraid of disapproval when their idea violates the norm imposed by the boss. On the other hand, people in low power distance cultures are less intimidated by their boss and they feel free to express their unique and novel ideas. In low power distance cultures employees are encouraged to express their unique ideas even when facing the risk that their ideas will be rejected. In contrast, in high power distance cultures employees wait to be told what to do, they avoid the risk of making errors and losing face. Instead, they elaborate on their ideas to justify their appropriateness. Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 5: The differences between members of high vs. low power distance cultures in focusing on the novelty of their creative ideas vs. elaborating on their usefulness will be moderated by the socio-hierarchical work context:*

*a. Individualists in low power distance cultures will demonstrate significantly higher levels of novelty compared with individualists in high power distance cultures when working in the presence of their boss; less differences are expected when working alone and privately.*

*b. Individualists in high power distance cultures will demonstrate significantly higher levels of elaboration on the appropriateness of their ideas compared with individuals in low power distance cultures, in particular when working in the presence of their boss than when working alone and privately.*

*The task context.* To facilitate creativity, the external conditions should be aligned with the nature of the task (Simpson, 2001). One important external condition is

situational strength. According to Mischel (1977), *strong situations* lead all participants to similar interpretations, dictate a clear and proper response, and result in similar types of responses. A red traffic light is a good example of a strong situation, where its meaning is clear to all and only specific responses are acceptable. In contrast, uncertain or vague circumstances are *weak situations* in which there are no clear cues for the appropriate reactions. These situations are perceived in a subjective manner, allowing a person to project his or her own personal thoughts and attributions in interpreting the situation, hence increasing the variance in responses. An example of a weak situation is a projection test such as the Rorschach, where one projects his or her inner world on a vague image.

The nature of a task, whether well-defined and structured, or ambiguous, determines the situational strength, which can influence creativity. Previous findings have demonstrated that a 'weak' task, with relatively vague information, rather than a 'strong' task, with detailed instructions, can enhance novelty (Nouri et al., 2008). In Nouri et al.'s study, homogenous dyads of either Singaporeans or Israelis and heterogeneous dyads of one Israeli student and one Singaporean student were instructed to come up with interpretations of images. These images were composed of the same figures, but the relationship of the elements in the figures with one another differed across the strong and weak situations. In the strong condition, the images had a recognized meaning (Yin-yang and Star of David), whereas in the weak condition, the two elements of each image (two separate triangles of the Star of David and two separate elements of the Yin and Yang) were presented independent of each other. As expected, the study found a weak task structure to have a positive effect on the originality of new ideas, as compared with a strong task structure. This conclusion was supported in both culturally heterogeneous and homogenous teams. The overall effect is important regardless of the level of team cultural diversity or the national origin of the study participants. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous teams were more creative under the weak situation compared with the strong situation.

Another field study conducted in East Germany demonstrated that a change in job characteristics towards higher levels of autonomy and complexity, namely a less structured situation, significantly enhanced employees' personal initiative although the general level of initiative in East Germany was significantly lower than in West Germany (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996). Thus, a subculture, characterized by personal initiative, can be formed within high uncertainty avoidance cultures by changing the task situational strength towards higher levels of task autonomy (Erez, 2008; Erez, 2010). We may expect within-culture differences in the level of novelty of creative ideas under strong vs. weak task structure, with higher levels of novelty in weak than strong task structures.

In addition, we expect that task structure will moderate the effect of uncertainty avoidance on the emphasis on the novelty and usefulness aspects of ideas. Individuals with high uncertainty avoidance can either avoid such situations or try to

structure them and reduce ambiguity by elaborating on the idea or explaining its relevance and appropriateness to the situation. In contrast, individuals who are low on uncertainty avoidance may take the opportunity to explore and look for novel ideas. A strong, well-defined task dictates the behaviors of individuals who perform it, for example, folding parachutes in a certain way, to assure that it opens up. In a well-structured task, there is no room for cultural differences in uncertainty avoidance. However, when the task is ill-structured, we expect low uncertainty avoidance individuals to explore different ways to perform it, whereas high uncertainty avoidance individuals will try to reduce uncertainty by elaborating on the appropriateness of their ideas. Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 6: The differences between members of high vs. low uncertainty avoidance cultures in focusing on the novelty of creative ideas vs. elaborating on their usefulness will be moderated by task structure. More significant differences are expected when working under a weak than strong task structure, such that*

*a. Members of low uncertainty avoidance culture will have more novel ideas than members of high uncertainty avoidance culture, particularly when working on a low structured task than a highly structured task.*

*b. Members of high uncertainty avoidance culture will elaborate more on the appropriateness of the ideas than members of a low uncertainty avoidance culture, particularly when working on a low structured task than a highly structured task.*

## DISCUSSION

The present article contributes to the knowledge on the relationship between culture and creativity by developing a conceptual framework that introduces two new factors into the culture–creativity relationship: first, we differentiate between novelty and usefulness in this relationship, proposing that cultural values influence the focus made by individuals on the novelty of an idea vs. elaborating on its usefulness. Second, we introduce social context as a moderator of the relationship between culture and the focus on novelty vs. usefulness. We propose that certain work contexts magnify the cultural differences whereas others attenuate such differences.

Previous research on culture and creativity in the work context did not distinguish between the novelty and the usefulness aspects of creativity, examining mainly the effect of culture on the novelty aspect. However, the usefulness aspect of an idea is no less important when implementing the idea and transforming it into a product. We identify three cultural values that regulate the focus given to the novelty vs. the usefulness and appropriateness of an idea. Cultures of low power

distance, low uncertainty avoidance, and low collectivism enhance the novelty of ideas, whereas the complementing values enhance elaboration on the appropriateness of the ideas.

The cultural variation in values, which leads to a differential focus on novelty vs. usefulness, may also have important implications at the national level. For example, the Israeli culture is known for its low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, and moderate collectivism – a cultural profile that leads people to focus on the novelty of an idea. This may explain why Israel is known as the ‘Start-up Nation’ (Senior & Singer, 2009), with about 2500 start-ups (Israel Venture Capital Research Center) and with more companies listed on NASDAQ than any other country, second only to the U.S. (Senior & Singer, 2009). On the other hand, Israel has only one large multinational company (Teva) and the rest of the high-tech companies are mostly of medium to small size (see, Israel Venture Capital Research Center). Large-scale organizations, capable of transforming ideas into products and of having a global presence, require advanced managerial and administrative knowledge, and the motivation to focus on the usefulness and appropriateness of ideas, a prerequisite to a successful implementation of new ideas and transforming them into products. The Israeli culture seems to support novel ideas more than their implementation, leading to the reputation of a ‘start-up nation’ rather than a nation with global high-tech companies, such as Finland, where the company Nokia was created. It is no wonder that most large multinational companies choose to open their research and development (R&D) sites in Israel, where the culture nourishes novel ideas. Following Zou et al. (2009), the collective consensus that Israel is a start-up nation may even strengthen the tendency of Israelis to focus on the novelty of their ideas rather than on the details necessary for boosting their appropriateness and usefulness. Hence, the type of innovation at the national level, whether emphasizing R&D or the successful implementation of new ideas, is shaped by relevant cultural values and the social consensus about these values.

Chinese culture appears to be different from Israeli culture by being high on uncertainty avoidance, high on collectivism, and moderate on power distance (House et al., 2004). Such a cultural profile emphasizes centralization and control (He & Tian, 2008), hence motivating people to follow instructions, to conform to rules and regulations, and to avoid expressing one’s unique ideas in order to avoid sanctions on deviation from the norm. There is great potential for R&D innovation in China, given that the number of engineers and scientists graduating each year in China is higher than that in the U.S. (Gupta, & Wang, 2009). Nevertheless, despite the Chinese government’s efforts during recent years to encourage R&D, the majority of Chinese companies manufacture products invented in the West.

The second contribution of this article is in highlighting the effect of the social context on the display of cultural differences and their effect on creativity. We propose that the social contexts, including the presence of peers and supervisors,

prime the relevant cultural norms and make them more salient to the individual, hence influencing one's tendency to show uniqueness and generate novel ideas, or to conform to the group and elaborate on the appropriateness of ideas for social consensus. In contrast, a private context, which neutralizes the influence of cultural values, allows individuals to display their natural propensity to generate novel ideas or to elaborate on their usefulness.

We identify the social context of working in the presence of peers as one context that accentuates the differences between members of *collectivistic* cultures who comply with social norms and avoid ideas that deviate from the main stream, and members of *individualistic* cultures who like to express their uniqueness and to be novel. In contrast, the influence of cultural values is attenuated under conditions of working privately. Furthermore, a socio-hierarchical context of working in the presence of a supervisor brings into salience the value of *power distance*, accentuating the difference between members from high power distance cultures, who follow instructions of their boss and refrain from freely expressing their ideas, and members of low power distance cultures, who continue to express their unique and novel ideas in the presence of their boss.

Finally, the third situational factor, task structure, facilitates the influence of the cultural value of *uncertainty avoidance*. A weak, rather than a strong task structure accentuates the differences between individuals with high or low levels of uncertainty avoidance.

### **Future Research Implications**

Future empirical research should further examine the moderating effect of the social context and of the task structure on the relationship between cultural values and the emphasis on the novelty vs. the appropriateness of the new idea. Furthermore, this effect should be tested over and above some personal characteristics that may explain such differences.

Given the cultural differences in the focus on the novelty vs. the appropriateness of ideas, future research also should examine whether multicultural teams may benefit from the complementary effect of having members from both individualistic and low power distance cultures and from collectivistic cultures and high low power distance cultures. It is possible that such multicultural teams can have the potential to contribute to both the novelty and the appropriateness of the ideas.

Finally, the situational effect suggests the value of studying different subcultures within the same overall national culture. Future research should test whether subcultures of high novelty may be formed in the collectivistic and high power distance cultures of the Far East. Similarly, research can analyse the conditions that give rise to a subculture that emphasizes the appropriateness and usefulness of the idea within individualistic and low power distance cultures which tend to emphasize the novelty.

## Managerial Implications

Our framework, if validated through future research, will have many important implications for management. If companies strive to encourage high novelty among collectivists or people from high power distance, they should encourage working alone rather than in teams or in the presence of a supervisor. They should also encourage working under relatively non-structured task conditions with high autonomy. In collectivistic and high power distance cultures, organizations should create opportunities for private idea generation using practices such as an anonymous electronic idea contribution box. In individualistic cultures, such anonymity may be less needed, as people are motivated to demonstrate their uniqueness publicly. On the other hand, to reduce variance and enhance the focus on the appropriateness of the tasks should be more structured and well defined.

## CONCLUSION

While creativity seems to be universal, its manifestation in the form of novelty or usefulness may differ across cultures and social contexts. Certain cultural values enhance the novelty of ideas while others emphasize their usefulness and appropriateness for implementation. The social and task contexts may either amplify or attenuate such differences. Social or socio-hierarchical contexts enhance the influence of cultural values, whereas a private context deemphasizes their influence. In the private context, the creativity process is more likely to be universal than in the social context. Individuals can liberate their spirit under conditions of anonymity, to fully express their unique ideas, free of the cultural constraints. Hence, the variance in individual differences under a private context may override the variance in cultural values. In contrast, under a social context, cultural values explain the variance in the tendency to focus on the novelty rather than on the appropriateness of the creative idea, over and above individual differences.

## NOTE

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