

The Canon of Spontaneity–Creativity Revisited: The Effect of Empirical Findings

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ABSTRACT. The author examines J. L. Moreno’s theory of spontaneity–creativity in light of recent empirical data reported in 3 studies using the Spontaneity Assessment Inventory (SAI) and the Spontaneity Deficit Inventory (SDI; A. Christoforou & D. A. Kipper, 2006; D. A. Kipper & J. Hundal, 2005; D. A. Kipper & W. A. Jones, 2005). The author focuses the discussion on the traditional depiction of the canon of spontaneity–creativity. In general, the data supports some of Moreno’s hypotheses. However, after a review of Moreno’s writing and the empirical findings, the author suggests that some modifications are needed in the earlier canon. In addition, he suggests that the canon needs to be expanded to include a description of the sequence that accounts for the effects of the lack of spontaneity.

Keywords: creativity, Moreno, spontaneity, theory of spontaneity–creativity

MORENO’S THEORY OF SPONTANEITY–CREATIVITY (1953) is the cornerstone of his view of mental health and psychopathology. The theory extended beyond the traditional realm of psychiatry and became his view of what makes life productive, satisfying, and fulfilling. Moreno proposed “the idea that the spontaneous creative matrix can be made the central focus of man’s world not only as the underlying source but on the very surface of his actual living” (1964, p. 109). Spontaneity and creativity, or, as Moreno referred to them, the *spontaneity state* and the *creative act*, are connected to other concepts that characterized his philosophy. Examples are the *Godhead*, *tele* (the basis of human interactions), the *moment*, the *encounter*, and *roles* (the basic matrix of the self).

By his own admission, Moreno arrived at his spontaneity–creativity theory using two methods of inquiry. One was a dialectical analysis and the other

was his personal observation of the conduct of people on the psychodrama stage and in life. When he formulated his ideas during the 1930s and 1940s, these were popular methods of scientific inquiry. At that time, they were deemed appropriate to lend credence to theoretical postulations. Today, intellectual analysis and a single person's clinical observations are accepted ways of formulating hypotheses but are not considered an adequate proof of their veridicality. Nowadays, the most compelling affirmation of theoretical hypotheses is the support of empirical data discovered by means of scientific investigations. Therefore, the veridicality of the spontaneity–creativity theory still awaits empirical backing.

Until recently, the absence of a measure of assessing either the spontaneous state (spontaneity) or the creative act (creativity), or both states, made it virtually impossible to investigate the validity of the famous canon of spontaneity–creativity (Moreno, 1993, p. 18) shown in Figure 1. However, the design of the Spontaneity Assessment Inventory (Kipper & Christoforou, 2006) and the Spontaneity Deficit Inventory (Kipper & Jones, 2005) created new investigative opportunities.

Briefly, the process of creating the SAI and SDI was as follows: The authors contacted 20 senior psychodramatists from the United States and Europe. All had a minimum of 25 years of experience and were known for their professional expertise in psychodrama in their own countries and internationally. They wrote five adjectives (or two- or three-word characterizations) that describe “the feeling of being in a spontaneous state” and five

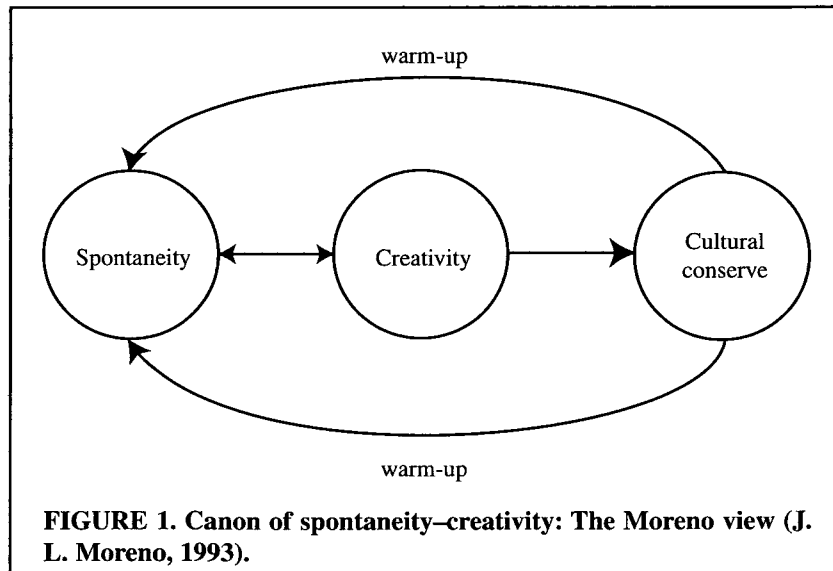


FIGURE 1. Canon of spontaneity–creativity: The Moreno view (J. L. Moreno, 1993).

adjectives that describe “the feeling of being in a nonspontaneous state.” The authors incorporated their descriptions into one list that, after they deleted redundancies and long descriptions, contained 125 adjectives, or items. At that point, there were 79 items in the spontaneous category and 46 in the nonspontaneous category.

On the basis of those descriptions, the authors made two sets of identical forms of the inventory. Each included the question, “How strongly do you have these feelings or thoughts during a typical day?” One inventory contained the spontaneous items and one contained the nonspontaneous items. They arranged the responses to each of the two inventories on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 6 (*very strong*). The results of a series of item analyses left the SAI with 20 items and the SDI with 17 items.

The results of the studies with the SAI and SDI confirmed some of Moreno’s propositions but also suggested the need for some changes to the hitherto untested postulates. In this article, I address Moreno’s classical canon of spontaneity–creativity and propose some modifications to make it congruent with empirical findings.

The Original Canon of Spontaneity–Creativity

Before I discuss the suggested modifications of the canon of spontaneity–creativity, it is helpful to summarize the original version. Figure 1 shows the canon of spontaneity–creativity as conceived by Moreno in his seminal book, *Who Shall Survive?* (1953). It was later reprinted in the abridged student edition (1993). In the original canon, Moreno hypothesized that spontaneity leads to creativity, which, in turn, results in cultural conserves. Once created, cultural conserves encourage further spontaneity through the warm-up process, and the cycle repeats itself.

The four components of the original canon are as follows:

1. *Spontaneity*. *Spontaneity* has been defined in several ways. It was originally described as an energy that propels the person to an appropriate and novel response in the face of an unpredictable situation. For unknown reasons, the word *propels* was subsequently dropped from the definition in which spontaneity was mislabeled as a *response*, or an appropriate and novel response to a new situation. The later definition, however, is inconsistent with Moreno’s repeated reference to spontaneity as a state, not a response. Spontaneity is a state of mind, or a state of readiness to act creatively. It is a form of an intrinsic motivation (i.e., energy) that precedes the process of acting. In the original depiction of the theory, that part of the canon was labeled simply *spontaneity* (see Figure 1). However, to eliminate a misunderstanding, I labeled the modified version of the canon in that part of the theory as *spontaneity state* (see Figure 2).

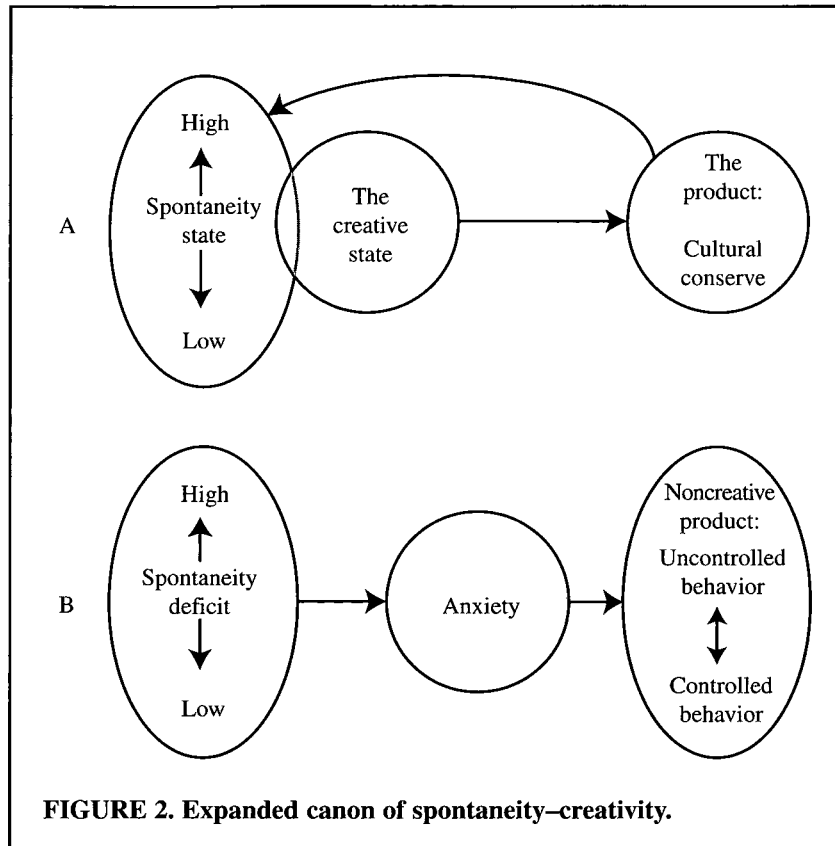


FIGURE 2. Expanded canon of spontaneity-creativity.

2. *Creativity*. The middle circle in the canon is labeled *creativity*. Moreno differentiated between the process of the creative state and the outcome of the product of that process. He referred to process as the creative act, and he called the product the *cultural conserve*.

According to Moreno (1964), the creative act is a state of mind. He made this point clear in the following example from his imagined description of Beethoven's creative state of mind before he composed his Ninth Symphony:

As Beethoven was walking through his garden trying intensively to warm up to his musical ideas, his whole personality was in an uproar. He made use of every possible physical and mental starter he could muster in order to get going in the right direction. These visions, images, thoughts, and action-patterns—both musical and non-musical inspirations—were the indispensable background out of which the music of the Ninth Symphony grew. But all this background, which

cannot be truthfully divorced from the state in which Beethoven was when he was truly being the creator, is not to be found in the finished product. (p. 112)

Although, for the sake of consistency with Moreno's narrative, it could be argued that the term *creative act* should be retained, I decided to use the term *state of creativity* in the canon to be in line with the terminology used for spontaneity (see Figure 2).

3. *Cultural conserves*. *Cultural conserves* refer to encapsulated forms of the product that came out of the creative act. Classical examples of cultural conserves are books, paintings, CDs, DVDs, and musical scores. Any product, whether an inanimate object, behavior, or ideology, that can be used repeatedly is considered to be a cultural conserve. Cultural conserves serve two important psychological and societal functions. They help the individual cope in threatening situations, and they secure the continuity of a cultural heritage. In their pure, ideal form, cultural conserves need not be represented as a perfectly packaged product.
4. *Warm-up*. The *warm-up* is a process of arousal that stimulates the spontaneity state. It can be triggered by outside or internal stimulations.

The Revised Canon of Spontaneity–Creativity

I suggest the proposed revised version of the canon of spontaneity–creativity in light of empirical results that emerged from studies in which researchers used the SAI and the SDI (Christoforou & Kipper, 2006; Kipper & Hundal, 2005; Kipper & Jones, 2005) and after a closer look at Moreno's own writing (1953, 1964). Figure 2 presents an illustration of the revised canon of spontaneity–creativity.

The first change concerns the overall depiction of Figure 2. I concluded that the canon needs to be divided into two parts, A and B. Part A depicts a healthy sequence of spontaneity–creativity and, with some changes, follows Moreno's classical canon. Part B is an additional element that was not proposed by Moreno. It represents the opposite side of part A, or the unhealthy (i.e., pathological) chain that characterizes a deficit in the spontaneity state or the maladaptive behavior sequence. Both sequences feature the theoretical processes of three essential components: motivation, process, and outcome. I represent the motivation aspect of the theory on the left side of Figure 2. I represent the process portion by the circles labeled *the creative state* and *anxiety*. The circles on the right side of Figure 2 represent the product aspect of the spontaneity–creativity sequence.

From the findings of Christoforou and Kipper (2006), Kipper and Hundal (2005), and Kipper and Jones (2005), I concluded that it is necessary to separate the healthy and unhealthy sequences. The studies revealed that the states

of spontaneity and spontaneity deficit are not two opposing ends of one continuum. Rather, they represent two separate continua. Spontaneity correlated positively with well-being, whereas spontaneity deficit correlated positively with measures of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and one's orientation in the past. The results suggested that, whereas spontaneity and spontaneity deficit are mutually exclusive states of mind, it is impossible to predict one state from the other. Therefore, a full exposition of the spontaneity-creativity theory requires a description of both sequences.

The second change concerns the design of Figure 2 in which I highlight the fact that the spontaneity state may appear in different intensities, all of which are considered healthy motivations. Accordingly, the instrument that assesses spontaneity (i.e., SAI) has been designed as a scale that measures degrees of spontaneity. Figure 2 addresses that feature by depicting spontaneity as a state that expresses itself in various degrees of intensity.

The third change (see Figure 2) refers to the relationship between the spontaneity state and the creative state. In the classical Moreno canon, the two are portrayed as separate psychological states (see Figure 1). However, after an examination of psychodrama literature (Kipper & Hundal, 2005) and empirical outcomes, I believe that the two are not only closely related, but also have some common attributes. In describing the creative state (act), Moreno wrote, "The first character of the creative act is its spontaneity" (1964, p. 35). Spontaneity is evidently a feature shared by the spontaneity state and the creative state. In support of this view, a factor analysis of the SAI by Kipper and Jones (2005) revealed that creativity was one of the five factors that comprised the SAI, albeit the smallest one. It was responsible for 8.85% of the explained variance. Although the spontaneity state and the creative state are separate states of mind, they share some characteristics, a feature that is accounted for in Figure 2. Like the classical canon, the modified version shows that the product of the creative state is the cultural conserve. It also retains the hypothesis that the warm-up process triggers spontaneity.

The New Part of the Canon of Spontaneity-Creativity

The lower portion of Figure 2 shows the new part of the spontaneity-creativity theory, one that has not been featured in the classical canon of spontaneity: creativity. My reason for advancing this part of the canon grew from the fact that spontaneity and spontaneity deficit emerged as separate attributes and, to a large extent, were independent of each other. Furthermore, the cited empirical findings support the notion that every person can be defined in terms of both attributes (i.e., the extent of the spontaneity state and the extent of the spontaneity deficit). In a study of the experience of spontaneity and the lack of it among U.S. psychodramatists, participants reported that they feel

spontaneous during a small part of the day but that they are nonspontaneous during most of their waking hours (Kipper, 2000). It seems that the level of one's spontaneity state and the level of one's spontaneity deficit define one's creativity.

In part B of Figure 2, I also indicate that anxiety mediates the state of spontaneity deficit and its outcome behavior. The only empirical finding that supports this sequence is that spontaneity deficit was found to be strongly correlated with both measures of state and trait anxiety (Christoforou & Kipper, 2006). More data about the spontaneity deficit–anxiety connection is needed. In addition, the hypothesis depicted in part B of Figure 2 is that anxiety (other than performance anxiety) leads to a noncreative product that may express itself in various forms. The forms can range from delusions to uncontrolled emotional behavior to highly repetitive behavior. That part of Figure 2 is, at the moment, a speculation because there is no direct data to lend credence to it. Future researchers should study this speculation.

The term *warm-up* does not appear in part B of Figure 2. That is because, in theory, the warm-up always leads to a spontaneity state. Thus, it does not play a role in the spontaneity deficit sequence.

Implications for Research and Theory Development

The revised canon of spontaneity–creativity concerns the classical theory underlying psychodrama; thus, its implications are primarily theoretical. However, one practical implication merits discussion. Part B of Figure 2 contains a three-component sequence of spontaneity—namely, spontaneous state, creative state, and cultural conserve—in which the first two components slightly overlap. Translated into operational terms, the three components are creating a readiness to act, helping the protagonist to generate ideas, and producing the final product (behavior) again, with the first two slightly overlapping. It appears that, when idea generation occurs (i.e., the creative state), the second component serves as an indispensable mediator between the part that evokes the readiness to act and the final completion of the act (behavior). This suggests that a greater emphasis ought to be given to the part that helps protagonists generate various options. It also suggests that a key component in training for spontaneity should be training clients to generate alternative ideas once they are sufficiently warmed up.

Turning to the research area, researchers have no justification, unlike in the past, for claiming that spontaneity cannot be measured and, therefore, that psychodrama theory need not be studied by means of the experimental or scientific method. The advent of two scales measuring spontaneity, the SAI (Kipper & Hundal, 2005) and the Personal Attitude Scale-II (Kellar, Treadwell, Kumar, & Leach, 2002), created new opportunities to test the veridicality of

various classical theoretical postulates. Therefore, I offer a few challenges for future research.

It is not clear whether the difference among people in their ability to display spontaneity is a matter of a general personality trait or whether the manifested frequency and intensity depends primarily on skill and practice. If the former is true, why are some people highly creative and, according to the canon, highly spontaneous, in one area of life—for example, great artists or scientists— but not in another area, such as their interpersonal skills? Does the difference in generating spontaneity in some areas of one's life but not in others stem from difficulty in one's spontaneity state or creativity state? If spontaneity is an innate trait with its fruition dependent on skill and practice, what does that practice look like? Is it more in the area of being open to new experiences (presumably part of the spontaneity state) or in learning to generate various ideas (part of the creativity state)?

In part B of Figure 2, the third component (the product) refers to two types of maladaptive behavior: controlled and uncontrolled. Both kinds of behavior are driven by anxiety (the middle component); thus, they are pathological. Being nonspontaneous is not necessary unhealthy. Rather, in many areas of life, one needs to be engaged in repetitive conduct to established stability and a healthy self-image. In part B of Figure 2, the difference between healthy repetitive (controlled) and unhealthy repetitive behavior is whether it is associated with anxiety. That hypothesis awaits empirical validation.

Last, with the advent of statistically reliable and valid measures of spontaneity, researchers have the opportunity to empirically investigate issues related to Moreno's theory. Researchers using that process can provide confirmation of theoretical ideas and suggest refinements or alterations of the old, hitherto unchallenged, positions.

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