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Creativity in context: The ecology of creativity evaluations and practices
in an artistic craft

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Abstract

The present article reports on the use of a multiple feedback methodology for the study of creativity evaluations in the case of Romanian Easter eggs. Four groups of evaluators have been chosen – ethnographers, priests, art teachers and folk artists – all members of professional communities relevant for this particular folk art. Respondents almost unanimously appreciated ‘traditional’ wax decorated eggs as highly creative for their designs, aesthetics and the hard work and talent they require but opinions diverged when commenting on the creativity of other types of Easter eggs. At a more general level, two broad evaluation patterns were found, corresponding to whether respondents participate or not in decoration practices. Identifying these patterns comes to reinforce the idea that creativity evaluations, as well as creative activity, are rooted in the social and cultural contexts of the participants and these contexts share important similarities but also marked differences.

Keywords: creativity, evaluation, practice, multiple feedback method, cultural psychology, Easter eggs, Romania

The creativity of everyday life

There are arguably two fundamental questions to be answered by the psychological study of creativity: “Where is creativity located?” and “What is creative?” The first interrogation is central for creativity theory, the second one for creativity assessment and, unsurprisingly, answers given to one will greatly influence the answers given to the other. For example, in what the first question is concerned, a traditional answer has been that creativity exists at the level of the individual, and especially the individual “mind” (Amabile, 1996; Montuori and Purser, 1995). Consequently, the question about what is and is not creative (including the level of creativity) focused on the measurement of either features of the creative person or product. Again as a matter of tradition, the persons chosen for research were usually highly gifted individuals, recognized creators who enjoyed fame and the “status” of genius in society (see Galton, 1869; Gardner, 1994). The creative outcomes of these individuals were typically great achievements, revolutionary for the fields of the arts, science and technology, politics, economy, etc. These are the origins of a “*great divide*” in the study of creativity, not only in psychology but also in connected disciplines, that between famous creators and “lay” people, between exceptional creative achievements and modest “attempts”, between art galleries, concert halls and scientific laboratories on the one hand and the life of the streets, of the markets, or the private homes on the other. In other words, the rupture between “true” creativity and everyday life.

This aspect has been long-discussed and many theorists signaled the dangers of adopting such a view. Among them, the writings of Dewey on aesthetics and the theory of art are of great relevance here.

“When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general

significance, with which aesthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed (...) to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 2).

The task set by Dewey has been partially accepted by psychologists who, roughly by the 1950s, shifted their attention from great creators to the study of “ordinary” people and especially after the 1980s, when increased concern has been shown for the social and cultural dynamics of creative acts, including in daily life (Craft, 2005; Lubart, 1999; John-Steiner, 1992). The social psychology of creativity (see Amabile, 1996) and, more recently, the cultural psychology of creativity (see Glăveanu, 2010) largely contributed to these changes and to a regained appreciation for the *creativity of everyday life*. The social approach influenced also the way in which we answer the second question: “What is creative?” A study of creative products made by individuals in the context of daily tasks became, in the last two decades, the standard for creativity assessment. Consensual forms of validation and cultural-bound definitions of creativity (Amabile, 1996; Hennessey, 2003) started to be used and, along with them, a “new” conception of creativity was reinforced: the creative process as taking place in community contexts, as being embedded in a network of social relations, dependent on social interactions and the use of existing cultural artifacts. It is precisely this conception, fundamental for the cultural or sociocultural psychology of creativity, that is supported by the present study.

The following research will illustrate an *ecological way for studying creativity evaluations*, one focused not on evaluations per se but on *evaluations in context*, on how

evaluations are shaped by the particular positions and experiences of each group of evaluators. Aiming to reveal the social embedding of creative evaluations and their strong connection to creative practices, and being supportive of the notion of “creativity of everyday life”, this research explores the mechanisms of the Easter egg craft-world in Romania. As such, it continues a tradition of studies dedicated to creativity, arts and crafts in different cultural contexts (Maduro, 1976; Cooper and Allen, 1999; Yokochi and Okada, 2005; Mall, 2007; Giuffre, 2009).

Easter eggs at the confluence between folklore, religion and art

The egg has always been an object of tremendous symbolic value. Throughout history and in the modern world eggs are associated with life itself, with birth, fertility, vitality, the forces of creation and the act of resurrection. Unsurprisingly, a closer investigation reveals several *archetypal forms* structuring this symbolism: the cosmogonic egg (the beginning of the world), the cosmological egg (cosmos and all its elements), the magical egg (in therapeutic, magical practices), the mystic and eschatological egg (associated with regeneration) and the festive egg (evocating important events) (Marian, 1992, p. 76). This great *polyphony of meaning* could only be accompanied by a *polyphony of practice*:

“Eggs are offered as gifts, paid as a due, and ornamented as a favourite decoration on festive occasions. They have been used in magic spells and in foretelling the future, in love potions and medicine, and have been thought effective in promoting healthy and fertile crops and animals” (Newall, 1984, p. 21).

This system of beliefs and practices associated with decorated eggs is an integral part of the Romanian culture and, it can be argued, Easter eggs today stand at the confluence

between folklore, religion and art. Eggs have been part of folklore and local mythologies since times immemorial. In ancient India, China, Tibet, Egypt, Phoenicia, Persia, Greece (Gorovei, 2001; Marian, 1992; Newall, 1967) they were often related to the origin of the world or the idea of totality. Traditions, especially in rural areas, still preserve some of the richness of the practices associated with colored or decorated eggs from pre-Christian times. However, in Romania and many other Christian Orthodox countries, folk practices related to egg decoration have largely been associated with Christianity for which “the egg provided a fresh symbol of the Resurrection and the transformation of death into life” (Newall, 1984, p. 22). Easter eggs, as religious artifacts, are an essential component of national identity particularly in a country like Romania, characterized by “religious nationalism” and where approximately 87 percent of the population is Christian Orthodox and 94 percent claim to believe in God (Barker, 2009; also Müller, 2008). And yet Easter egg making is not reduced only to coloring eggs, but involves all sorts of decoration techniques culminating with the highly elaborate designs used by “professional” folk artists. With them Easter eggs acquire a new meaning, as art objects, appreciated both by the general public and experts who consider that, “among all the folk arts Romanians have, decorating eggs is, in a way, the most ‘artful’ of all in the purest sense we attribute to this term” (Zahacinschi and Zahacinschi, 1992, pp. 15-16).

In concluding, both the making and use or “reception” of Easter eggs in the Romanian context are rooted in a diverse body of traditions and open to a panoply of meanings and interpretations. This reminds of Eco’s notion of “open work”, where the object is susceptible of “a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality” (Eco, 1989, p. 21). Understandably then, the Romanian word for decoration in the case of eggs is *încondeiere*, related to the verb “to write” (*condei*, writing tool). The colors and motifs used in decoration are rightfully compared to a language (see Tzigara-

Samurcaș's, 1999, reference to “the grammar of the ornament”), a system of symbols that seem to reunite old Romanian folkloric and religious traditions under the auspices of art.

Egg decoration as a craft-world

Describing the practice of Easter egg making in Romania basically means revealing the actors, resources and mechanisms of a craft-world (see Becker, 2008; Fine, 2004).

Largely documented (Bodnarescul, 1920; Gorovei, 2001), in what Easter eggs are concerned there is a basic distinction to be made between colored eggs (monochrome) and decorated eggs (usually polychrome). Colored eggs can be either red or of other colors. Decorated eggs have different names in different parts of Romania, and they all involve a traditional system of decoration (instruments, colors, motifs) that today is preserved almost exclusively in the rural parts of the country. “Urban eggs” are often the result of other types of decoration, involving for example the application of leaves or stickers. On the other hand, the practice of coloring eggs, especially red, less elaborate and highly evocative of religious significations, is widespread in both urban and rural settings.

The main “actors” of egg decoration are women and children, but there are also cases of men decorators. The making of Easter eggs requires collaboration within the family, less in the case of coloring and almost always in the case of decoration, where tasks are distributed among family members, from children to elders (Zahacinschi and Zahacinschi, 1992, p. 32). This is also because many folk artists have started in the last few decades to make a living (or contribute to the family budget) by selling decorated eggs and therefore produce them in large numbers for what seems to be a growing market (Hutt, 2005). This made egg decoration an occupation throughout the year and not restricted to the days before Easter (usually Maundy Thursday). Furthermore, this changed the types of eggs used in decoration – eggs are emptied and range from chicken to goose and ostrich – and generated an expansion in decoration techniques.



IMAGE 1. Decorating eggs with wax using a *chișiță*

It is important to note that “traditional” egg decoration in Romania relies on a fairly common body of resources and conventions. Eggs are decorated with the help of a *chișiță* or *condei* (see Image 1), a stick with a metal pin at one end used to draw the motifs in wax. Eggs are successively covered with wax on certain portions according to the chosen design and immersed into color (traditionally yellow, followed by red and finally black) so that, in the end, after cleaning the wax off, the egg would show all the desired shapes and colors (Irimie, 1969; Newall, 1967; Zahacinschi and Zahacinschi, 1992). There is an impressive number of motifs used in egg decoration (Gorovei alone listing 291) classified as: geometrical, vegetal (fitomorphic), animal (zoomorphic), anthropomorphic, skeomorphic (objects), and religious (Zahacinschi and Zahacinschi, 1992, p. 35). However, the existence of traditional motifs doesn’t reduce the possibilities for innovation, on the contrary, endless variations of established models are possible (see Image 2) and professional decorators often create new motifs. In addition, decoration itself shows great local variability and it is not reduced to the wax techniques above but includes many others possibilities such as making eggs with leaves (fixing leaves on the egg before immersing in color) or with beads (applying small beads on a wooden egg previously covered in wax).



IMAGE 2. Variations of the star motif

[white, yellow and red shapes on a black background; Cristina Timu]

Finally, Easter eggs, whether full or emptied, simply colored or richly decorated, are used in a multitude of ways, most of them connected to Easter celebrations but not only. To begin with, colored eggs are present on the Easter table and family and friends knock them saying “Christ has Risen!” (*Hristos a Înviat!*) and replying “Truly He has Risen!” (*Adevărat a Înviat!*). Eggs are also given as gifts, as charity or used for reciprocal exchange. They have a strong social function (Bodnarescu, 1920; Marian, 1992) since both their decoration and use require the presence and participation of others.

Research methodology

Theoretical underpinning

The methodology of the present research is based on a cultural psychology approach to creativity and assessment (see Glăveanu, 2010a; 2010b). At a theoretical level, cultural psychology operates with a *tetradic framework* of self (creator) – other (community) – new artifact (creation) – existing artifacts (culture) for conceptualizing creativity and is therefore interested in how creative practices and evaluations are shaped by different socio-cultural contexts. In terms of creativity evaluation, this approach favors a *multiple feedback*

methodology that involves the use of different groups of “appropriate assessors” to evaluate the creativity of a certain product or class of products. In this case appropriate assessors are not necessarily experts but persons who are in contact with the creation, for whom the creation is relevant or have influence over the distribution of the creation. Furthermore, this methodology requires an in-depth understanding of the *context of creativity evaluations*, the social and cultural “circumstances” assessors find themselves in, in other words, the communities they belong to, their experiences and interactions with others as well as the norms and beliefs they draw from in making their judgments.

In concluding, while the multiple feedback continues in many ways the approach set by the consensual assessment technique (Amabile, 1996), it also differs from it in terms of sample and purpose. It employs people from different groups and not a relatively homogenous group of “experts” (or persons with at least some formal training in the domain of the creation) and it strives to capture and understand the *diversity* of creativity evaluations and not the uniformity of participant rankings.

Data collection: Participants and research questions

Since it has been argued before that Easter eggs are at the confluence between folklore, religion and art, “appropriate” observers have been considered from the following communities: ethnographers, priests and art teachers. Members of these distinct groups are all in contact with the practice, have an interest in its products (especially ethnographers) and also have a certain power over the “generation” and “distribution” of Easter eggs in specific social contexts: fairs and exhibitions, church service, art classes in school. Also, as a requirement of a cultural psychology approach, folk artists themselves formed a group of evaluators. Nonetheless, what is to be noted about Easter eggs is that *almost everyone* in Romania is somehow involved in egg making and/or has close family members who make eggs for Easter, even if only colored. Thus it becomes even more important to investigate not

only how people evaluate Easter egg creativity but also how evaluations relate to their own engagement, in some form or another, with this practice. On the whole, the following set of questions guided the investigation:

1. *How do ethnographers, priests, art teachers and folk artists evaluate the creativity of Easter eggs?*
2. *How are their evaluations rooted in the particular set of norms and beliefs that constitute the “culture” of these four different professional communities?*
3. *What is the engagement of ethnographers, priests, art teachers and folk artists with Easter egg making and what kind of self-other relations does it involve?*

In employing the multiple feedback a qualitative approach was considered to be the most suitable due to its distinctive advantages: the possibility of taking account of contexts, an emphasis on describing the world as it is perceived by different observers, and a strong process orientation (Dey, 1993). Data has been collected with the help of individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide covered general topics such as: a) personal experience with Easter eggs, b) considerations about this practice in the Romanian context, and c) creativity and Easter eggs. Interviews were generally opened by a free association task (first three words related to the Easter egg) and incorporated, in the creativity segment, a discussion of four Easter egg images (colored eggs, eggs with leaves, eggs with traditional decoration and eggs with stickers) used to prompt further considerations about creativity in Easter egg making. Notably, considering the qualitative nature of the investigation, respondents were not asked to “score” the creativity of the decorated eggs presented in the four images, since the purpose of this study was to explore creativity evaluations concerning a whole class of artistic craft products, and not to assess the creativity of specific exemplars.

The study included a total of 27 persons. Respondents were selected using convenience sampling but also paying attention to their typicality for the professional categories represented in the research. All seven ethnographers were employees of the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest. The six priests served at churches in Bucharest and the six art teachers, all graduates of the faculty of fine arts, taught children at different state schools in Bucharest. The eight folk artists mostly came from rural Northern Romania (Suceava district) and all of them produced decorated eggs for selling, many being nationally recognized for their mastery of the craft. Data collection took place in March and April 2009 (Christian Orthodox Easter was on 19th of April) and ethnographers, priests and art teachers were interviewed at their workplace. Folk artists were interviewed during a national fair organized before Easter at the Romanian Peasant Museum. Interviews were audio recorded and all respondents agreed to the conditions of the study.

Data analysis: The use of thematic networks

After data collection all interviews have been transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This procedure, well-established in the literature, involves “meaning condensation” (Kvale, 1996) through revealing patterns in the information described as themes (Boyatzis, 1998). The analytic process, facilitated by the use of ATLAS.ti 5.0, followed the classic steps of coding: a) stating the research concerns and theoretical framework; b) grouping together related passages and generating themes; c) grounding the themes into abstract concepts consistent with the theoretical framework and finally producing an overall narrative (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003, p. 43). In order to keep the confidentiality of the data, ethnographers received code names, from E1 to E7, priests from P1 to P6 and art teachers from A1 to A6. Folk artists agreed to be named in the report. The coding process was *both data and theory driven* and the four main elements of the tetradic framework served as global themes operationalized as follows:

1. *Self*: Included all codes that made reference to personal experiences with Easter eggs and Easter egg making both in childhood and at an adult age;
2. *Other*: Included all codes referring to people the self interacts with directly or indirectly in the process of decoration (from family to larger community) or in the use and/or distribution of Easter eggs (professional contacts);
3. *New artifact*: Included all codes referring to particular Easter eggs made by self or family (their types, number, etc.) as well as beliefs about Easter eggs (issues of classification, value) and Easter egg creativity;
4. *Existing artifacts*: Included all codes referring to the system of norms, beliefs and practices related to Easter eggs (from Easter as a religious celebration to the resources involved in decoration) as well as existing representations of creativity.

Results: Creativity evaluations in context

Evaluating creativity

Easter egg creativity: consensual views. One important result of this application of the multiple feedback for the evaluation of Easter egg creativity is that, across the four groups of “evaluators”, *a high consensus was found in appreciating that there is creativity in Easter egg making*. When asked if they think of the Easter egg as a creative product the vast majority of respondents agreed this is the case. Just rarely was the Easter egg considered to be outside notions of creativity (P2) or “just” a minor form of creative expression (A3). Another observation is that, when explaining why Easter eggs are creative, it became obvious that most respondents took into account “*traditional*” Easter eggs, those decorated with wax and specific nowadays for rural Northern Romania. These eggs, and not those colored or decorated with leaves, come to embody creativity in the practice of Easter egg making:

“I: Have you ever thought about Easter eggs as creative products?”

R: Yes, but just if they are decorated [încondeiate; traditional decoration], are made.

When it's just the red egg it is not necessarily something creative because it's too

banal, if I could say so, anyone can do it. When [eggs] are decorated and made with

soul and [are] beautiful yes [they are creative]” (P4)

High appreciation for traditional egg decoration was often articulated with enthusiasm and some of the respondents expressed astonishment at how peasant women are capable of making such beautiful artifacts and how they have time for this craft: *“because these women that made eggs and worked enormously for them, had children, had a husband, had work to do outside, work in the house”* (E6). What is repeatedly stressed is the meticulousness involved in this kind of decoration, a complexity that made even art teachers recognize they would not be able to reach *“such rigor and such beauty”* (A5). Similar opinions are also found in the literature, where authors like Zahacincshi and Zahacinschi (1992, p. 32) consider Easter egg decoration as represented by its *“preciseness, wealth and nobility of motifs, harmonic conjugation of colors, explosive imagination, spontaneity with which the craftswoman solves, ‘as they happen’, some of the most difficult artistic and technical problems”*.

Another common point in the discussion about Easter egg creativity is the frequency with which the *idea of art* came up, again across the four groups. Decorated eggs are artistic creations that *“lead you to the church”* (P3) and entail *“thoughtfulness, composition, line, color, everything involved by the domain of visual arts”* (E1). Art teachers themselves were quick to catalogue Easter eggs as *“very creative, very; surprisingly creative”*, a form of *“pure art”* (A6) and to locate them in the domain of folk arts (A2).

At the same time, even within traditional decoration and between folk artists, there are differences that need to be acknowledged. As one of the ethnographers noted, “*indeed, there are some artists, but we can't include everyone in this category*” (E7). Similar delineations were made by folk artists themselves who were ready to appreciate the creativity of colleagues whose work they know and, with just one exception in the group of eight interviewed decorators, their own creative expression. Notably, that exception was also the only person to say she took egg decoration out of necessity after losing a previous job.

What folk artists answered when asked about their work was that, while following some basic decoration rules, they “*always invent something new*” (Maria Zinici). If there is no specific order requiring the multiplication of a certain model, there “*must*” be something differently done for each egg (Ileana Hotopilă), sometimes a completely new model. In the end there are no perfect copies of an egg since “*eggs don't have the same size, they couldn't, and colors are changed, it depends on the state of mind you are in at that moment*” (Rodica Berechea). As Livia Balacian said laughing, “*and even if I want to make a certain model, I still have to change something, it's like it is easier to change then to let everything be the same every time*”. This is the reason why most folk artists stated they rarely know beforehand how the egg will turn out in the end, it all becomes clear in the process, and sometimes changes are “imposed” by the necessity of not juxtaposing certain colors (Veronica Iamnițchi) or other stylistic requirements. Even artists like Dionis Spătaru, who respect in detail certain models (belonging to *Cucuteni ceramics*) and are keen on not changing anything in terms of design and colors, appreciated that there is great creativity in “*translating*” an image from pot to egg and in all the adjustments this work involves. This leads for some folk artists to the idea that Easter egg making entails *talent* (since some can do it, some don't, even in the case of their children). It also means that artists develop a personal style that, as all agreed, can be recognized out of “*thousands*” of eggs (Maria Zinici).

Types of decoration and creativity: divergent views. As part of the interview, respondents also commented on creativity in traditionally decorated eggs, eggs decorated with leaves, simply colored eggs and eggs with stickers. Folk artists made reference to some of these forms spontaneously during the interviews. What emerged is a complex picture of divergent views, some within but mostly across groups, and four types of approaches to creativity in egg decoration became salient.

Ethnographers often described creativity in Easter egg making as a *continuum*, where traditional forms of decoration show the highest creativity, followed by eggs with leaves, then simply colored eggs and finally, at the other end, eggs with stickers. If in traditional egg decoration combining motifs and choosing colors entails “*maximal creativity*” and “*a lot of imagination*” (E6), eggs with leaves are more “*repetitive*”, a form of “*small creativity*” (E1) born out of the need to make something more beautiful (E3). What seems to be underlying this distinction is the amount of *effort and skill* people invest in making such eggs. If traditional eggs are carefully “*thought through*” (E5), eggs with leaves come second because they require “*some cognitive effort*” (E2), at least compared to simple coloring. But the category that was almost unanimously disliked by ethnographers was that of eggs with stickers. Often catalogued as *kitsch*, eggs with stickers make no sense, “*a synthesis made by people with no roots*” (E6), and only respondents who had small children admitted using them at times but without necessarily liking this practice. In the *kitsch* category many ethnographers also included eggs decorated with Christmas motifs (E5).

The group of priests referred more to creativity and Easter eggs as *controversial*. Although they generally appreciated traditional decoration as a form of “*art, culture*” (P5), working on emptied eggs departs from the original purpose of these artifacts (P2) and an Easter egg is creative:

“for as long as the meaning of being an Easter egg is not lost. For as long as they are not dissociated from symbolism, for as long as the ones seeing the Easter egg don’t forget the tight connection it has with the sacrifice of our Savior” (P6).

This is why, the same priest argued, we don’t consider icons for example as works of art. In this context, simple red eggs were regarded as most appropriate for Easter followed by traditional decoration, drawing from *“the tradition of the church, then cultural traditions; from the artistic tradition of the church” (P4)*. The effort behind making eggs with leaves was often appreciated as well: if traditional decoration is a form of *“art looking at eternity”*, eggs with leaves illustrate *“art looking at the present” (P3)*. As in the case of ethnographers, eggs with stickers were seen as having *“no religious significance” (P3)*, being *“a form of religious marketing” (P1)* and not representing Romanian traditions (P4) and spirituality (P6).

For the group of artists the general admiration for traditional Easter eggs and tendency to oppose them to eggs with stickers was again present, but also left room for an image where *“all eggs are potentially creative”*. First, the egg in itself, as a shape, allows for multiple ways of decoration (A1). Traditional Easter eggs are creative for several reasons: they communicate deep meaning, they allow innovation, they stylize reality and are the product of hard work. Eggs with leaves were considered more *“modest attempts” (A5)*, but they could increase their expressivity if different leaves are chosen and positioned on the egg in unique ways (A4); the leaf models could even be painted further with watercolors (A6). Even simply colored eggs could become more creative by diversifying the range of colors (A5) and art teachers themselves often combine the colors they use for dyeing eggs. Finally, eggs with stickers were again considered on the whole as *kitsch*, *“distortions of meaning”*, *“surrogates” (A3)*. Still, even in this case, there was an opinion that only putting a lot of stickers on the

same egg is kitsch, but a single sticker with the right kind of symbol could look beautiful in some ways (A6).

Folk artists mostly referred in their interviews to their own work and the work of other artists using traditional decoration. There was respect and recognition for the work of others (“*This is my style, how I work. The woman across has another style, not like mine, her own*”). In this sense, a general view that Easter egg making requires creativity working from within tradition was paramount. Furthermore, folk artists were less evaluative when it came to the creativity of particular forms of decoration. There was only one criterion that stood out as essential: the *quality* of the work. This relates to the dedication and skill each artist has and also to the motivation for Easter eggs making. Some make eggs only for money, putting no “*soul*” in their work (Maria Zinici). This is often the case of those who commercialize eggs with stickers and are very much disliked by folk artists because they “*trick*” buyers and destroy the value of real Easter egg making. In the end, what matters most is for the egg to be made “*by the hands*” of the artist.

Important to note, this diversity of beliefs about which eggs are more or less creative is potentially underpinned by a diversity of conceptions about creativity itself. If ethnographers and priests discussed creativity in terms of an “*improvement*” of what already exists (i.e. traditional practices), artists and folk artists tended to emphasize the “*naturalness*” of creative expression and its connection to the *aesthetic* (making something beautiful come into being). All these evaluations (both general and related to egg decoration practices) need to be contextualized further in terms of the social and cultural factors leading to their emergence.

Contextualizing evaluations

Easter egg: traditions and conventions. It has been said about art objects that they “demand interpretation” (Zittoun et al., 2003, p. 429). This is certainly valid for every Easter egg, artifacts whose creativity and meaning are appreciated only with reference to a larger

cultural background of existing artifacts, of norms and beliefs, in this particular case, the world of traditions concerning Easter and Easter egg decoration. Respondents from all four groups commented on this aspect, acknowledging the fact that the value of Easter eggs resides in the synthesis they offer between constant innovation and a deep and meaningful Romanian tradition where both terms define and require each other.

Ethnographers were probably the ones who were in the best position to appreciate the richness of Easter egg decoration practices. This is how one finds in their set of interviews numerous remarks about the traditional making and use of Easter eggs. They referred to legends about Easter eggs, to the controversy around the proper day for coloring eggs, the customs of washing your face with water in which a red egg was put, of keeping eggs or egg shells for protection, of giving Easter eggs for charity or sending the shells to a legendary people called *Blajini*. Local differences in decoration were put in perspective as being reflective of the different conditions of living in the North and South of Romania, in villages from the plain as compared to the mountain (E7). In the end though, all customs and their variations constitute a unitary picture of Romanian folklore and confirm the fact that „*Romanian folk culture is a culture of Resurrection*” (E1). This is something priests were also in agreement with. „*The Easter egg encompasses the entire sequence of events from the crucifixion of Christ to His Resurrection and elevation to the sky*” (P6).

From the more practical perspective of art teachers and especially folk artists, as persons involved in the actual decoration of eggs to different degrees, the practice of Easter egg making also includes a set of *conventions*, of basic rules that facilitate the decoration process and allow some forms of innovation over others. For art teachers these were primarily artistic conventions guiding the use of traditional art elements (point, line, color) in ways that generate chromatic harmony and structural equilibrium. Many teachers prioritize specific shapes over others, for example rhombus and curve lines (A6), and promote the use

of complementary colors to generate artistic contrasts (A5). Folk artists on the other hand have much more experience in working directly on the egg and using wax decoration. What they emphasized were basic rules of decoration such as: not making mistakes when working with wax, going from light to dark colors in decoration, starting with the segmentation of work fields on the egg, respecting distances in decoration and not juxtaposing similar colors, using clean wax and, for eggs made with wax in relief, applying wax in the same quantity, etc. In the end, all creation must respect the “nature” of the craft since:

“You can’t, no matter what you do, abandon tradition, because you would be making something else [not Easter eggs] and it would be worthless. Even if some things are added, a little flower, a square, anything, it is normal to create but you must always consider tradition” (Rodica Berechea).

The multiple faces of change. In agreement with the cultural psychology perspective on creativity, findings about Easter egg creativity reveal how important “existing artifacts” are for the generation of a “new artifact”. In the words of Feldman (1988, p. 288), all “previous efforts, as represented in a culture’s products, models, technologies, and so forth, are of enormous value to the creator”. These assertions need further qualification in terms of a temporal dimension. Artifacts, norms, beliefs and material objects don’t just exist as a static reality. They constantly transform, grow, adapt. “Conventions represent the continuing adjustment of the cooperating parties to the changing conditions in which they practice; as conditions change, they change” (Becker, 2008, p. 59). This dynamism is clearly illustrated by the custom of Easter egg making in Romania.

Generally in all interviews, across the four groups, changes in Easter practices and egg decoration were noticed and commented on, changes that have to do with both past-

present and rural-urban differences. Common observations referred to Easter eggs being made now all year long, to the use of emptied eggs and artificial colors and the expansion of commerce often associated with a diversification of types of decorated eggs (also in Zahacincshi and Zahacinschi, 1992). This is what made some ethnographers notice that today what we call “traditional eggs” are no longer traditional in the strict sense of the word, they are the “*neo-tradition*” (E3), “*a traditional model that adapts to a very modern market*” (E5). In the end, there seems to be one constant in the process of change: eggs are and always have been central for Easter, “*there is no Easter without the eggs*” (A5).

Interviews also revealed important information about reactions to change and a rather common tendency of seeing this process as “*bad*”. Across the groups participants complained that things tend to be *lost*, especially in the city (A1) and even villages are turning into “*small towns*” threatened by globalization and uniformity (P1). Priests were especially sensitive to changes that “affect” not only egg decoration but Easter celebration more generally, pointing to the “secularization of Easter” and “commercialization of the festival” authors like Barnett (1949, p. 70) also referred to. Ethnographers noticed about Easter eggs that we (including folk artists) can no longer “read” traditional motifs, “*we don’t understand anymore what the women who drew the lost way, the plough, or the ram’s horns, wanted to tell us*” (E7). Losing meaning directly affects the value and importance of Easter eggs.

However, change was not perceived as bad in all cases. There were even ethnographers willing to accept the fact that all the innovations contributed to keeping the craft alive and even made it expand (E2). Folk artists were the first to testify for the benefits of adopting many of the novelties that transformed this craft-world in the past few decades. As the interviews show, there were distinguishable “*narratives of change*” that folk artists shared, and some included the appreciation of self as a *pioneer of change*. This is the case of Ileana Hotopilă who, along with her sister, Maria Zinici, was proud to have introduced many

innovations in egg decoration. Collaborating with persons from the US after the anti-communist revolution, both Maria and Ileana started to decorate eggs for different moments of the year, including Christmas. The range of colors and motifs expanded and very soon other decorators adopted the “*new trends*” in ways that reflected their particular style.

In conclusion, there is always both stability and change in the practice of Easter egg making and this qualifies it as a form of “*Great Tradition*”, or a tradition that incorporates activity and creativity (Eisenstadt, 1973, p. 120). It is a *vital tradition* in the sense that it is constantly re-created, never finished or complete (Negus and Pickering, 2004, p. 104), always in a movement towards the future, always “*carrying on*” (Ingold and Hallam, 2007, p. 6). All these aspects are perfectly captured by an ethnographer’s comment about creativity and tradition saying that “*the world is made up of some customs that give you freedom, but this freedom is a freedom that keeps*” and does not create a “*rupture*” or “*annihilation of old creation*” (E1). This is why the multiple faces of change described in this section are all symbolically growing out of and continuing a “*body*” of tradition, the only one that can make their existence meaningful.

Expressing evaluations

A polyphony of practices. When turning to the *personal engagement* respondents from all four groups have with the practice of Easter egg making the resulting image is one of diversity. Some respondents (mainly priests and some of the ethnographers) don’t color eggs themselves but “*indirectly*” participate by helping family members with Easter preparations. When eggs are just dyed, it is often only in red or, if more colors are used, red is sure to be one of them. Art teachers and ethnographers, especially those with small children, often make efforts to go *beyond* simple coloring of the eggs and try to combine primary colors (obtaining different tones of green, orange and purple), to decorate eggs with leaves and even to ornate them with stickers for the enjoyment of their children. At the other extreme, folk artists

decorate a large number of eggs and use different techniques (most of the times both traditional decoration with wax and wax in relief). Notably though, Easter eggs they make at home for the religious celebration are simple, generally colored in red and sometimes showing the symbol of the cross and different Easter messages.

This state of affairs is, to a great extent, expressive of the type of creativity evaluations made by members from each of the four groups. As many of the priests identify Easter eggs with red eggs and value their deep significance, they often encourage at home the practice of coloring eggs red. Ethnographers and priests alike appreciated traditional egg decoration but the lack of skill and time makes these eggs an ideal they felt they couldn't put in practice, so most tended to use at home the simplest coloring methods.

This is the case for some of the art teachers as well, but because most of them saw potential for creativity and the generation of beauty as associated with Easter egg making, many experimented feely and came up with surprising results. For example A6 has a collection of the eggs she decorated in past years using a multitude of techniques from painting to wax dripping, from decorating pigeon eggs to painting a coconut shell (resembling an ostrich egg). In the end, it is of course the folk artists included in the study who, as part of their "professional" activity, constantly develop and practice a vast range of decoration styles and techniques, using a variety of colors, motifs and designs.

Regulation and resistance. Easter egg making is certainly a collective type of activity. It often depends on the help of others and it is always directed towards others: people to share the eggs with, to show the eggs to, to sell them to, etc. Family members, neighbors, clients, members of the larger community, all participate in the life of this craft-world. The explicit and implicit presence of others is something all respondents commented on. There were stories of collaboration and mutual agreement, also referred to above, but also stories about the imposition of certain rules and the reactions to them.

Some participants from the group of ethnographers took part, at times, in organizing Easter fairs and inviting folk artists to display and commercialize their creations. Efforts were made in these cases to discourage those who bring eggs with colors and motifs outside of “normal” conventions. Still, as noted by one ethnographer (E1), some folk artists regularly find ways to surpass the “censure” and come with different types of eggs in different bags, some to be shown only when there are no museum personnel around. When discovered they argue that “*it is what the buyers want*” but this is not a valid argument for many ethnographers who believe folk artists should take more responsibility for their actions (“*now they like it because you [as producer] drug them with images and stories and then everyone becomes addicted but you drugged them, you made them addicted*”, E1).

Animated by such views, some museum workers claimed it is their *professional duty* to stop the proliferation of kitsch in Easter egg making (E7) and, in a more radical formulation, authors like Arthur Gorovei (2001, p. 110) came to argue that “the primitive art of peasant women from the depth of the mountains or the fields of the country is the only tradition that deserves to be researched”. Contrary to this, other respondents disliked the idea of a selection processes for fairs and exhibitions and argued it is not aesthetics but “*truth*” and the objective analysis of current realities that need to prevail in an ethnographer’s work (E5).

A similar situation can be found in the case of priests, who overall considered that Easter eggs brought to the church (for Easter) should be red but regularly found parishioners coming with eggs of all colors. This is where, for many, “*the church has the role of educating people*” (P4) and so parishioners are directly or indirectly told to bring only red colored eggs. Nevertheless, there is also resistance to these ideas, and one of the priests mentioned that it is nowhere written that eggs should only be red (P5). Besides, if the wife at home makes eggs of other colors or they are received as gifts, “*you can’t say ‘put these aside’*” (P2).

Even more flexibility in terms of decoration was promoted by art teachers. Most of those who work Easter eggs at school claimed they allow children to make “*a spontaneous, free creation, with no rules*” (A2) and encourage all students, independent of their result (A4). But, as in any form of teaching, there are some basic notions regarding chromatic harmony and decorative art that teachers always want to convey. In the end though, there was great appreciation for self-expression and sometimes larger inter-disciplinary projects were made with students from several classes.

Discussion: Patterns of practice and evaluation

In the previous sections thematic networks have been described in a compartmentalized way, guided by the three research questions. At this point the analysis has to leave space for an overall *synthesis*, one that would reveal final connections between the evaluation of and the practice associated with Easter egg decoration. This is imperative since the four elements of the tetradic framework of creativity (self, other, new artifact, existing artifacts) are conceptualized as *interdependent*. In the present discussion emphasis will therefore be put on the *entirety* of the research framework and the two main emerging patterns of creativity evaluation, one corresponding to the “view from outside” and the other to the “view from inside” the practice of egg decoration.

Before proceeding three observations are needed. First, the notion of “inside” in this context refers to direct participation in forms of egg decoration and is not meant to imply any kind of deeper or more valuable insight “insiders” have over “outsiders”. Second, generating patterns may have the benefit of bringing previously disparate pieces together but this is done at the cost of losing much individual detail. Therefore, the patterns discussed next are reflective of the overall findings but may well be imperfect for describing individual cases. Third, patterns are based on the principle of correlation, not causality. They show how practices of the self, relations with others, use of cultural resources or beliefs about new

artifacts “*go together*” and not how one aspect determines others. These are all issues to be unpacked by further research using a different methodology.

The view from “outside”

The starting point for generating overall patterns that would characterize the data from this multiple feedback exercise is the *personal and direct involvement in elaborate egg decoration*. Using this perspective, the view from “outside” is constructed from responses of persons who, although closely connected to the practice of Easter egg making and its products, don’t generally try egg decoration themselves outside of coloring or other simple procedures (such as making eggs with leaves). From the data it became clear that the above group includes mainly ethnographers, priests, and some of the art teachers.

The key conclusion that can be drawn from this broad category of evaluators is that creativity *exists in some Easter eggs more than others* and there tends to be a clear separation between types of Easter eggs. Overall, traditional decoration is appreciated as highly creative, but even in this regard there seems to be a controversy about the value of certain “innovative” forms of decoration that radically depart from conventional ways. Respondents holding the view from “outside” are by and large strongly attached to the tradition of Easter egg making, folkloric and/or religious. Basing their judgments on this consistent background of beliefs and customs, they can *find it easy to appreciate certain Easter eggs more than others* (for example to value red eggs for their simplicity and deep symbolism). This is mostly why, being unable to decorate eggs traditionally due to lack of time, skill and exercise, many of these respondents are inclined not to decorate altogether and keep eggs plain but “authentic”. Such appreciations also guide them in their contact with others where they tend to “regulate” in some sense the production of Easter eggs to conform to an ideal set by tradition, and therefore to teach others (folk artists, parishioners, children, etc.) the value of working towards this ideal.

These conclusions are of great importance for understanding how creativity evaluations are made by members of groups that are in contact with and even have some kind of power over the production and selection of creative artifacts. As Dewey (1934, p. 49) stated, “perfection in execution cannot be measured or defined in terms of execution; it implies those who perceive and enjoy the product that is executed”. Ethnographers, priests and school teachers may seem on the “outside” of egg decoration as people who don’t generally practice it in its most elaborate forms, but they are certainly very active “inside” the *validation* of Easter eggs’ value and creativity.

The view from “inside”

It is folk artists and a few of the art teachers who actually engage in elaborate forms of egg decoration, the first involved in selling Easter eggs, the second in making them at home or during art classes.

Respondents in this case formulate a different assessment of creativity being inclined to see *most Easter eggs as creative in one way or another*, or at least as having the *potential to enhance their level of creativity*. Working to decorate eggs and collaborating closely with others for this task (family members, school children, etc.), gives respondents an appreciation of the difficulties and also the opportunities inherent in Easter egg making in terms of creative combinations and generation of “novelties”. Furthermore, folk artists in particular are commonly open to diversifying their work techniques based on the requests of the “market”. Respondents from this broad group also tend to be less evaluative about different types of Easter eggs and to appreciate each for its own virtues. When judgments are made they are grounded more in aesthetics and concern beauty alongside the “quality” of the work. They acknowledge the existence of a solid tradition of Easter egg making and are more flexible in relation to it, considering its set of motifs, colors, designs and conventions as resources ready to be used in creative ways.

To clarify further, this is not to say that tradition is in any way less important for folk artists than it is for example for ethnographers and priests. Folk artists are proud of working within a strong tradition and enriching it with their work. What differs to some extent is how tradition is approached in this case, more as a “*resource*” than as a “*standard*”. If the relationship between tradition and innovation, constrains and possibilities, “can be viewed as a fight, a war, a revolution, or as an ongoing process of change and dialogue” (Montuori and Purser, 1995, p. 74), it is certainly the latter perspective that informs the practice of egg decorators and allows them to adapt to the ever-changing demands of an increasing public, both from Romania and abroad, interested in Easter eggs.

Final reflection on the use of multiple feedback

The present research started from the general premise that “creativity takes place within, is constituted and influenced by, and has consequences for, a social context” (Westwood and Low, 2003, p. 236). If cultural psychology contributes to psychology overall by emphasizing meaning, practice and products (Markus and Hamedani, 2007), an application of cultural psychology to the field of creativity and, in particular, to creativity evaluation, was convinced in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of creativity judgments as rooted in particular social and cultural contexts and sets of practices. Designing and using the multiple feedback method for the study of creativity in Easter egg making in Romania therefore offered an ecological and situational understanding of how ethnographers, priests, art teachers and folk artists formulate certain opinions about creativity and how these opinions are embedded in larger complexes of cultural norms and self-other relations. As the final conclusions came to show, there are general patterns structuring people’s conceptions about and engagement with Easter egg decoration and these reveal important similarities but also marked differences between the four groups. Both the “generation” and “evaluation” of creativity can be fully understood only in the context of their production.

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