Expounding the Relationship Between Playfulness and Creativity in Work Teams: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

The dynamics and consequences of human play have long been of interest to philosophers, biologists, and psychologists, who suggest that play is central to the ways humans develop and make sense of the world. Early social theorists intertwined playfulness with creativity, and empirical research has provided compelling evidence for this relationship. However, while many researchers have explored the relationship between playfulness and creativity, most studies have examined individual-level rather than team-level processes, and few organizational scholars have explored the consequences of playfulness for creativity in the workplace. Furthermore, the field lacks coherence on the underlying social and psychological processes through which playfulness promotes team creativity. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by integrating a diverse array of scholarship to develop a conceptual model of the social psychological mechanisms through which playfulness enhances creativity in work teams. Specifically, I propose that playfulness in teams promotes positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation, which in turn promote creative team processes and outcomes. Theoretical rationale for these dynamics is provided, and practical implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: creativity, playfulness, groups and teams.

Introduction

The dynamics of human play have long been of interest to philosophers, biologists, and psychologists, who conclude that play is a part of social life that is vital to learning, well-being, and even survival (Huizinga, 1955; Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Sandelands, 2003). Influential theorists like Freud (1926), Erikson (1950), Piaget (1962), and Bruner (1974) proposed that playing is the most important way we develop, adapt, interact, and make sense of the world as children, both cognitively and physically. Others have shown that play in childhood benefits intellectual and social development by building crucial psychological resources (Lieberman, 1977; Abramis, 1990; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). As adults, humans continue to use play to experiment with new roles, develop new skills, feel control in their lives, and experience authenticity (March, 1979; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Sandelands, 2003).

Despite the fact that playful behavior can be found nearly anywhere (Frankl, 1959), and nearly any activity can be performed playfully (Sutton-Smith, 1997), play remains a sorely understudied phenomenon in organizational research (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). This may be because work and play were

considered largely antithetical throughout the industrial revolution (Abramis, 1990). Modern organizations, however, are increasingly focused on fostering more playful cultures and practices in order to promote the kind of creativity and innovation that will enable them to compete in the global economy (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). For example, companies like 3M and Google have routinized flexible personal project time (i.e., "20% time") to promote innovation by giving employees time and space to play with new ideas (Nemeth, 1997).

Business organizations are increasingly grounding their corporate identities in playfulness, such as in the cases of Southwest Airlines, Pixar, and the renowned product design firm IDEO. Playfulness is central and essential to IDEO's famous "design thinking" process to innovation, in which designers aim to find creative solutions to difficult problems by role-playing through users' perspectives (Brown, 2008a). IDEO leaders are so convinced that playfulness enhances design team creativity that they actively encourage pranks, games, competitions, group field trips, and other playful interactions (Kelley, 2001). For this reason, physical spaces are also designed in a way that will foster playfulness and imagination (Brown, 2008b), outgrowths of IDEO founder Tom Kelley's "conviction that children are naturally creative – at least until the educational system beats it out of them" (Tischler, 2009, para. 29).

Such playful organizational environments have also helped other companies stimulate innovation, attract top talent, and earn "best company" accolades (O'Reilly, 1997). By providing employees with play spaces like art rooms, game rooms, and athletic courts, firms like Google, Facebook, and SAS aim to stimulate playful activity that leads to technological innovation (Google, 2007; Hoahland, 2006). Nicholson (2000, p. 179) even argues that "one could say that the whole of Silicon Valley stems from gangs of young men who carried on playing together beyond their college years."

A small but growing domain of scholarship has investigated the antecedents and consequences of playfulness in the workplace. Among this research, as with earlier psychological studies, there is compelling evidence of a strong relationship between playfulness and creativity in organizations (Silverman, 2016). Mainemelis and Ronson (2006), summarizing much of the extant literature on the topic, concluded that, more often than not, organizational creativity is born of playfulness. Sandelands (2010) similarly argues that while change and innovation in organizations can happen in ways other than play, there is something unique and special about the creativity fostered by play, because "play calls upon the deepest vitality of human community and thereby upon its greatest possibilities for adaptation and development" (p. 72).

Still, despite the growth in this area of study, a relatively limited realm of organizational research has examined these relationships and their underlying dynamics (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Of the extant research, the vast majority has been conducted at the individual level of analysis (Amabile, 1996; Isen, 1999), leaving particular gaps in our understanding of the relationship

between playfulness and creativity at the team level (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). This is unfortunate, since so much of the creative work in modern organizations takes place in work teams (George, 2007). In addition, researchers have tended to focus on intrapersonal and cognitive aspects of play, rather than on interpersonal and affective processes and consequences (Aldag & Sherony, 2001; Glynn, 1994). This has left the field with an incomplete understanding of the social and emotional processes through which playfulness affects creativity. Finally, the social and psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between playfulness and creativity in organizations remain understudied and undertheorized (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), creating opportunity for scholars to further "open the black box" of this relationship. The aim of this study is to redress these gaps by building on the extant literature to develop an integrative conceptual model for the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams.

This study makes four main contributions. First, I bring together research on cognitive, affective, and social processes to theorize a more comprehensive set of mechanisms by which playfulness enhances creativity. Specifically, I suggest that positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation mediate the relationship between playfulness and creativity in teams. Second, I answer calls for team-level theory and research about playfulness and creativity. Third, I develop theory about the relationship between playfulness and creativity in organizational settings in particular. And fourth, I employ playfulness as the focal independent variable, rather than play, because it offers a broader framework for theorizing about organizational behaviors that contribute to creative outcomes in organizations.

I begin by differentiating the constructs of play and playfulness. I then develop a conceptual model and theoretical propositions for how playfulness affects creativity in work teams, building from extant psychological and organizational research. Finally, I conclude with discussion about the implications and applications of this framework, as well as future research directions.

Distinguishing Play and Playfulness

Most research on the relationship between playfulness and creativity has focused on either "play" or "playfulness." While the meanings of these concepts are intertwined, they represent distinct research constructs. It is therefore important to define and differentiate them.

Play can be defined as an activity performed for pleasure (Russ, 2004). Many research studies begin with Huizinga's (1955) conceptualization of play, including the notion that play is a voluntary and instinctual activity that has clear rules and boundaries. According to Huizinga (1955, p. 5), "play is non-seriousness" that can be distinguished from the "real world." This does not, however, mean that play is not serious (Huizinga, 1955). To the contrary, play can be very serious, as in the case of sport or games (Huizinga, 1955). Play is

also proposed to be a pure form of being and interaction, where human imagination is captured and realized through cognitive, social, and physical spontaneity (Huizinga, 1955).

Playfulness can be defined as the capacity to "frame or reframe a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment" (Barnett, 2007, p. 955). While play is an activity, playfulness is a state of being (Klein, 1980). Reviewing and integrating the literature to date, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) concluded that playing tends to manifest in one of two ways in organizational contexts: "diversionary play" that is a *break* from normal work tasks, and playful ways of *engaging* in work tasks. These researchers conclude that the latter category – playful ways of engaging in work tasks (i.e., playfulness) – has a stronger and more direct relationship with creativity (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006).

The vast majority of theory and research to date has employed the construct of play rather than playfulness (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Unfortunately, a limitation to theorizing about the relationship between play and creativity, particularly in organizational contexts, is that there is limited agreement on precisely which activities can be deemed play and which cannot (West, 2014). The same is not true of examining the relationship between playfulness and creativity, because the level of playfulness experienced by an individual or team can be measured, manipulated, and distinguished (Bateson & Martin, 2013). Researchers also find that a playful behavioral approach to an activity, or a playful attitude, may be more important to stimulating creativity than the nature of the activity itself (West, 2014). In addition, since nearly any activity can be performed playfully (Sutton-Smith, 1997), including work activities (Glynn, 1994), playfulness as a state of being offers a more encompassing and generative research construct than does play. For these reasons, I have chosen to build theory about the relationship between playfulness and creativity.

Conceptual Model and Theoretical Propositions
In the next section, I integrate a diverse array of research to develop a conceptual model for the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams. I first summarize research demonstrating a positive relationship between playfulness and creativity. I then provide evidence for three social psychological mechanisms that I propose mediate the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams: positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation. These lead to theoretical propositions that may be tested in future research. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this conceptual model.
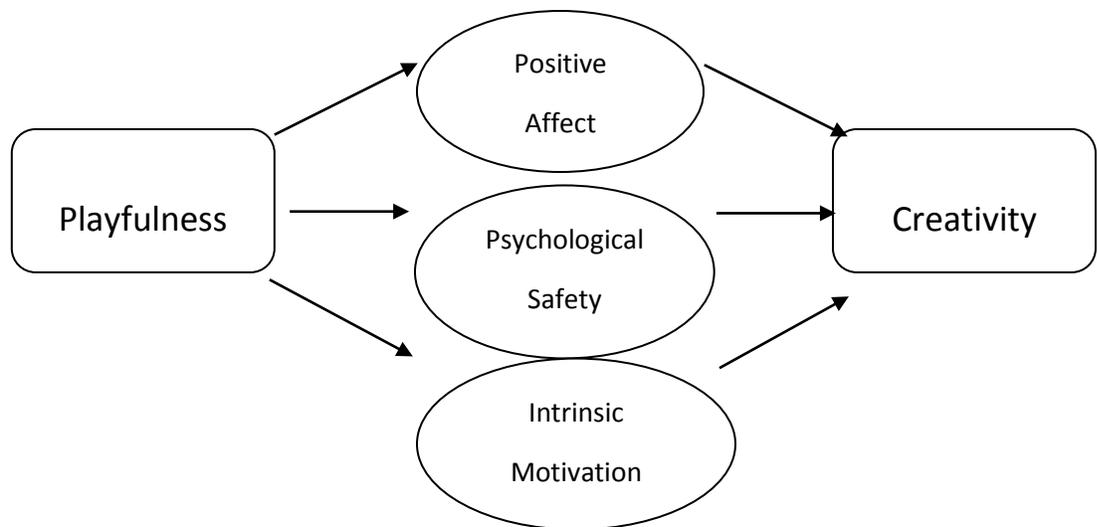
Figure 1. Proposed Causal Mechanisms Underlying the Relationship Between Playfulness and Creativity in Work Teams.

Playfulness and Creativity

Creativity can be defined as the production of ideas or solutions that are both novel and useful (Amabile, 1988, 1996). Some level of creativity is required in almost any job (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000), and creativity leads to innovation that helps organizations achieve competitive advantage (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Although scholarship specifically focused on the relationship between playfulness (rather than play) and creativity is limited, extant theory and research demonstrates a positive relationship between playfulness and creativity (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Bateson & Nettle, 2014; Lieberman, 1977; Tegano, 1990). This is in keeping with influential early social theorists, who associated playfulness with creativity and suggested that the two are deeply interconnected (e.g., Freud, 1926; Huizinga, 1955; Piaget, 1962). There is compelling empirical evidence that play and playfulness are related to creative performance in both children (Christian, 2011) and adults (Barnett, 2007; Proyer & Ruch, 2011). Looking directly at this relationship, Bateson and Nettle (2014) recently found a positive correlation between playfulness and creativity in the self-reports of creators.

There is also considerable research support in the organizational literature for the positive relationship between playfulness and creativity (Amabile, 1988; Glynn, 1994; Isen, 2000; Silverman, 2016; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). As with much psychological research at the time, most of the early organizational research focused on cognitive mechanisms of this relationship at the individual level (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). This scholarship suggested that play enhances creativity by fostering unusual mental associations (Bruner, 1972), removing the expectation of behavioral consistency (March, 1979), stimulating the recombination of behavioral repertoire elements in novel ways (Weick, 1979), or providing creators with greater freedom and safety (away from rigid

structural requirements) to explore possibilities (Amabile, 1996). Compared to persons focused exclusively on task outcomes, individuals in a playful state produce solutions that are more creative, complex, and image-laden (Glynn, 1994). Not only this, but playful individuals also often deliberately take more indirect or elaborate paths to solutions, enjoying and prolonging the *process* of playing (Glynn, 1994).

More recently, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) found that, among creative exemplars, creativity is fostered by playful approaches to work. Play has been found to be an effective way of developing divergent thinking, which is important for the generation of creative ideas and solutions (Dansky, 1999; Kolb, 2000). Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) find that periods of playfulness and "mindless work" in organizations foster creativity by promoting idea incubation and flexibility. Isaksen, Lauer, Ekvall, and Britz (2001) also found that organizations promoting play among employees tend to be more creative than others. Not only this, but those studying organizational adaptation conclude that playfulness is uniquely powerful in enabling innovation and change (March, 1979; Sandelands, 2010). Findings such as these have led researchers to champion the creation of playful workplaces as practical and impactful management strategies (Abramis, 1990).

In sum, although there is limited extant research at the team level, the preponderance of evidence suggests a positive relationship between playfulness and creativity in teams.

> *Proposition 1*. Playfulness is positively related to creativity in work teams.

While some scholars have linked playfulness to creativity directly, I draw on other research evidence to propose that three social psychological mechanisms facilitate the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams: positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation. Support for these proposed mediating processes follows in the next three sections.

The Mediating Role of Positive Affect
Positive affect is the subjective experience of positively-valenced moods or emotions like liking, excitement, gratitude, and joy (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Empirical research has demonstrated that playfulness promotes positive affect, which, in turn, promotes creativity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Dandridge, 1986). Playful experiences are often laden with affect, as team members become absorbed in the process of playing and often perceive themselves moving and progressing together toward unexpected solutions (Sandelands, 1988, 2010). Indeed, many psychological studies experimentally induce positive affect in participants with playful interventions (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Although play can involve negative emotions as well as positive emotions, "it generally results in some form of positive affect, be it fun, relaxation, ecstatic

joy, or emotional relief" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006, p. 91). Playful interactions also promote experiences of flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990) and timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001) that immerse players in the task and contribute to positive affect. Often, players experience positive affect while "getting lost" in the task (Russ, 1993) or feeling excitement attached to experiences of surprise or uncertainty (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Research suggests that play elicits positive affect connected temporally to the experience of play, and that the joy of play is attached to the *experience* of playfulness rather than to achieving a particular goal (i.e., winning) (Glynn, 1994; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Scholarship has therefore demonstrated a strong relationship between playfulness and positive affect.

Likewise, a considerable amount of research demonstrates a positive relationship between positive affect and creativity (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Isen, Johnson, Mertz, & Robinson, 1985; Isen, 1999; Jovanovic, Meinel, Schrodel, & Voigt, 2016). This body of research shows that positive affective states (including those elicited through play) produce more cognitive flexibility, associative fluency, and idea categorization, which enhance creativity (Isen et al., 1985; Isen et al., 1987; Greene & Noice, 1988; Hirt, McDonald, & Melton, 1996; Isen, 1999). For example, after experimentally priming positive affect in participants, Isen and colleagues (1987) found that those individuals were more creative in their problem solving. Additionally, positive affect resulting from challenge has been shown to stimulate the kind of divergent thinking (Kahn & Isen, 1993) and task persistence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that is helpful in the production of creative outcomes. Integrating these findings, Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions proposes that while negative emotions lead to narrower, problem-centered thinking, positive emotions (e.g., joy and love) promote broadened thought-action repertoires that result in cognitive flexibility and, therefore, creativity (Isen et al., 1987; Isen, 2000; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Researchers also find that concepts can connect emotionally even when they seem unrelated cognitively, and that such connections are particularly conducive to creative imagery, metaphors, and analogies (Feist, 1999; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006).

Although a limited amount of team-level research has explored the relationship between positive affect and creativity, the conclusions of the extant research are consistent with individual-level results. For example, in a field study of work teams, Amabile and colleagues (2005) found a clear linear relationship between positive affect and team creativity, where the increase in team creativity lasted up to two days.

In sum, these findings suggest that playfulness promotes positive affect, and that positive affect, in turn, promotes work team creativity.

> *Proposition 2*. Positive affect partially mediates the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams.

The Mediating Role of Team Psychological Safety

The second mechanism through which I propose playfulness strengthens creativity in teams is team psychological safety. Research suggests that work teams that play together are more likely to produce innovative solutions (Dougherty & Takacs, 2004). Sandelands (2010, p. 72) argues that "play is the creative dynamic of human community." Play is inherently a social activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It fills a basic human need for contact with others and encourages the formation of social groups (Huizinga, 1955; Maslow, 1971; Sandelands, 2003). It is not difficult to think of situations in which we play individually, but the very idea of playing typically evokes images of relational activities or games. The social elements of children's or adults' play are also common to adults at work (Abramis, 1990). Taking leadership, sharing, and cooperating are some of these common elements of play that also build social resources like friendship (Fredrickson, 1998). Not surprisingly, these are elements that are crucial to the effectiveness of work teams as well (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). For this reason, business organizations are increasingly realizing that "a company that plays together, stays together" (Mariotti, 1999).

When experiencing states of playfulness as a group, team members are likely to experience merger (or "oneness") and synchrony with one another (Sandelands, 2003). Sandelands (2010, p. 76) notes that, "in play, the boundaries that usually isolate one person from another – the identities that distinguish them as individuals – are overcome by the life of the community." Team members typically have heightened focus on how they appear to others, particularly in new teams, where members have not yet established social roles and are therefore more guarded and less likely to trust each other (George, 2007). Through shared playful interactions, however, team members experience a stronger sense of belongingness to their work team (Dutton et al., 1994) and develop stronger interpersonal trust and relationships (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). These dynamics make playful interactions likely to build *team psychological safety*, which is the belief that team members can behave freely without fear of evaluation and judgment from team members (Edmondson, 1999).

Team psychological safety bolsters a team's capacity for creativity (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). Creativity can be risky, because it comes with associated risks of failure and uncertainty (George, 2007), and contextual signals of repercussions for creativity will diminish organizational creativity (George and Zhou, 2007). In organizational environments where risk-taking is encouraged and uncertainty is not avoided, however, creativity is more likely (Isaken et al., 2001; Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Team psychological safety is likely to increase team creativity because team members will feel more free to experiment with and propose novel approaches and ideas that will lead to creative outcomes (Edmondson, 1999). Likewise, organizational environments with supportive coworkers and more socializing among team members elicit higher levels of

group creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Zhou & George, 2001; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Gilson & Shalley, 2004; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Additionally, in order to generate creative solutions, creators must be capable of employing and switching between different perspectives (Isen, 1999). Fortunately, "play facilitates exploring different perspectives, creating alternative worlds, assuming different roles, (and) enacting different identities" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006, p. 95).

In sum, the extant research suggests that playful teams are more likely to establish and maintain stronger interpersonal connections and team psychological safety, which increases the likelihood of those teams generating creative solutions.

> *Proposition 3.* Positive interpersonal relationships partially mediate the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams.

The Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation

The third and final mechanism that I propose mediates the relationship between playfulness and creativity in teams is intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation arises from an individual's positive reaction to a task itself, rather than to external factors, and may be experienced as interest, involvement, curiosity, satisfaction, or positive challenge (Amabile, 1996). Play, by definition, is considered to be an internally motivated task that is performed for pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Russ, 2004). Humans want to play, and we enjoy it for the process of playing more than we do for the outcomes it produces (Huizinga, 1955). Research by Glynn (1994) found that participants who performed a puzzle labeled as "play" (rather than as "work") were more intrinsically motivated to perform that task. Others find that play increases interest in, involvement with, and curiosity about the content of tasks (Webster & Martocchio, 1992, 1993). Glynn and Barr (2001) found additional support for this perspective when they asked workers to list five top adjectives that describe "work" and "play." While play was described in positive words like "fun," "enjoyable," and "happy," some of the most common adjectives for work were "boring," "hard," and "difficult." Indeed, researchers have suggested that taking a playful approach to work may help compensate for an absence of intrinsically motivating task qualities (Glynn, 1994).

In states of playfulness, individuals are likely to experience a sense of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), peak experience (Rogers, 1969), and self-actualization (Maslow, 1971). Such moments are experienced as special and consequential, because players identify so significantly with what they are doing and with each other in these moments (Sandelands, 2010). The positive relational connections that result from playful team interactions can therefore also contribute to intrinsic motivation (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Mainemelis & Ronson (2006, p. 99) conclude that "play is not a necessary condition of intrinsic motivation,

but it is a sufficient one."

Increases in intrinsic motivation are likely to lead to increased creativity in teams as well (Gilson & Shalley, 2004). Creativity demands playing with and practicing novel approaches and solutions to problems (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Torrance, 1995). Creators are much more likely and capable of doing so when they are intrinsically motivated to the task (Amabile, 1988). In fact, a large number of studies have concluded that it is very difficult to produce creative solutions without intrinsic motivation (see Amabile, 1996; Collins & Amabile, 1999; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Katz, 1998), because "creativity requires some level of internal, sustaining force that pushes individuals to persevere in the face of challenges inherent to creative work" (Gilson & Shalley, 2004, p. 36). Indeed, a preponderance of research evidence "has identified intrinsic motivation as the form of motivation most closely linked to creativity" (Amabile et al., 2005, p. 7).

In sum, the extant research suggests that playfulness in teams increases intrinsic motivation, which will in turn increase team creativity.

> *Proposition 4*. Intrinsic motivation partially mediates the relationship between playfulness and creativity in work teams.

Discussion

It has long been held that where creative processes or innovative outcomes are valued, playfulness can have important benefits (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). As innovation becomes increasingly important in the global economy, groundbreaking organizations have deliberately injected playfulness into their work processes and environments in order to attract and retain employees, create more motivating and fulfilling work experiences, stimulate interpersonal connection, and deliver the kind of creative output required to develop and maintain competitive advantage (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Playful environments within organizations have also driven customer loyalty outside of organizations, as some companies steep their public identities in playfulness (Nicholson, 2000). A growing domain of scholarship justifies these actions, with researchers proposing that a shift to a more playful workplace can enable more organizational adaptation, broader strategic vision, and innovation (Glynn & Barr, 2001).

However, even as the research literature on the relationship between playfulness and creativity has grown, scholars have focused on this relationship primarily at the individual level, rather than at the team level where most creative work in organizations takes place. In addition, while scholars have explored the direct relationship between play and creativity, the field has lacked a coherent, integrative, testable conceptual model of the underlying mechanisms through which playfulness affects creativity in teams. Furthermore, much of the extant research has focused on play as an activity, rather than on playfulness as a state of being. Finally, although there is an ever-growing range

of research on this topic, most of the scholarship to date has been conducted outside of organizational settings.

The conceptual model and theoretical propositions developed here contribute to the literature in several ways. First, by proposing three mechanisms through which playfulness enhances creativity in work teams (positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation), I illuminate important social psychological underpinnings of the playfulness-creativity relationship. Not only does this bring greater coherence to a fairly disparate domain of scholarship, but it also provides a testable model for future research. Second, by theorizing about how playfulness enhances creativity in teams, I answer Mainemelis' and Ronson's (2006) call for theory and research about the relationship between playfulness and creativity at the group level. The vast majority of prior research on this topic has been at the individual level of analysis, even though creativity in organizations is typically produced in teams. Third, while many scholars have extrapolated psychological findings about play to their organizational research, the model developed here is intentionally oriented around playfulness and creativity in organizations. Lastly, since virtually any activity can be engaged in a playful state, even if the activity itself isn't considered "play," this model's focus on playfulness offers a broader framework for theorizing about organizational behaviors that contribute to creative outcomes in organizations.

While positive affect, team psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation were proposed as the social psychological mechanisms through which playfulness enhances creativity in work teams, it is possible that additional social or psychological processes may facilitate this relationship. Empirical research examining these relationships will help determine the strength of the proposed model and may unearth other mediating processes as well.

Although the proposed relationships have been theorized in one causal direction, there are likely reciprocal relationships among them. For example, it is plausible that intrinsic task motivation promotes playfulness as well as being fostered by it. However, based on the current research evidence, it is reasonable to assume that the causal relationships are stronger in the theorized directions than in the opposite directions. In the case of intrinsic motivation, for example, Mainemelis & Ronson (2006, p. 100) argue that "play is a sufficient condition of intrinsic motivation while the inverse is not true." Similar arguments can be made for the other proposed mechanisms as well. Ultimately, this is an empirical question that should be examined in future research testing the proposed conceptual model.

Playfulness may also have other benefits for work teams. Psychologists have demonstrated that time spent engaging in physical activity, relating to others, or appreciating nature has restorative effects on energy, focus, and mental and physical well-being (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). It is reasonable to believe that play in teams, which shares many of the same behavioral characteristics as these activities, could have the same positive

effects. It is surprising, therefore, that some theories place playfulness at odds with work effectiveness or goal-achievement (see Glynn & Barr, 2001 for a review). To the contrary, researchers have found that playfulness does not diminish goal-orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and that even labeling work as "play" can be functional (Glynn, 1994). Allowing or encouraging playfulness in the workplace can also lead to positive consequences like improved quality and learning (March, 1979; Statler, Roos, & Victor, 2009).

A playful approach to work should also have other positive benefits for teams, employees, and organizations, like stronger and more trusting interpersonal relationships and greater employee motivation (Becker & Steele, 1995). When humans' social needs are being met, we are less focused on satisfying those needs, thereby reducing distraction from work and increasing performance (Abramis, 1990). In organizational contexts, these dynamics may actually lead to enhanced productivity over the long-term, making up for the "productivity losses" typical of creative processes (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Paulus, 2000). This relationship between playfulness and productivity in teams is a question that invites further investigation as well.

Practical Implications

Integrating a wide array of scholarship on the relationship between playfulness and creativity, the conceptual model developed in this study suggests that, for organizations pursuing innovative solutions, playfulness can have practical benefits for both work teams and individuals. However, there are certainly also times when playfulness in the workplace would be improper or even detrimental (Aldag & Sherony, 2001). Playfulness may be distracting, disruptive, and in the extreme, offensive. Some writers have even complained that "mandatory fun is epidemic these days" (Hamilton, 2000, para. 1). Such concerns underscore the importance of play being voluntarily and genuine, rather than forced on employees – a perspective reinforced by early theorists. Huizinga (1955), for example, asserted that play is necessarily a voluntary activity; once it is ordered to happen, it is no longer play. This makes routinizing playfulness in organizations more challenging, and efforts to do so potentially problematic. At the same time, organizations should be encouraged by the substantial research evidence that shows that organizational contexts promoting playful experiences and interactions foster more positive affect, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation. Future research should continue to explore the conditions and environments in which playfulness in the workplace is appropriate, and if institutionalizing it is advisable or even possible.

Future Directions

There are myriad possibilities for future work in this stream of research, in addition to those already mentioned above. First and foremost, empirical study of the conceptual model developed here will be crucial in evaluating the predictive strength of the model as well as its generalizability. Since all three

proposed mechanisms relate to established constructs (with related research methods) in organizational studies, researchers should be capable of empirically examining the model with experiments or field research. After the relationships between playfulness and creativity in teams are examined further, it would also be valuable to explore whether the ways in which playfulness impacts team creativity differs by team size or between existing and newly formed teams. It would also be fascinating to explore whether persons in particular jobs benefit more from workplace playfulness than others. Abramis (1990) suggested that because play increases arousal and attentiveness, persons in boring jobs may actually benefit more from playfulness than those in more stimulating jobs.

Conclusion

Sandelands (2003, p. 11) proposes that in playful experiences, "creative fantasy meets and [often] changes" organizational reality. The research presented here suggests that this is indeed the case for work teams engaging playfully, and that this process is facilitated by increases in positive affect, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation. The present study addressed important gaps in the literature and built on prior theory and research to develop a conceptual model for how playfulness enhances creativity in work teams. I hope that this research sparks further examination and elaboration of the positive and negative consequences of playfulness for work teams, individuals, and organizations.

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