Creative Aspirations or Pipe Dreams?
Toward Understanding Creative Mortification in Children and Adolescents

Ronald A. Beghetto, Anna E. Dilley

Abstract

What experiences influence the development of creativity in children and adolescents? One experience is the mortification of creative aspirations. Creative mortification (CM) refers to the loss of one’s willingness to pursue a particular creative aspiration following a negative performance outcome. The purpose of this article is to introduce an empirically testable model of CM. Specifically, the model highlights how CM can result from interpreting a negative performance outcome through the lens of internal attributions, fixed ability beliefs, and the experience of shame. The model further posits that young people’s level of aspirational commitment, the feedback they receive, and their sociocultural context can moderate their interpretations and experiences of negative performance outcomes and CM. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Childhood and adolescence represent key developmental periods in which young people explore and engage in various forms of creative expression (e.g., dance, writing, science, drawing, sports). These early experiences play a critical role in developing creative aspirations into creative identities. We define creative identity as a self-perception that a particular creative activity has been incorporated into one’s sense of self (e.g., “I am a dancer,” “I am a poet”). One way to think about the development of creative identity is along a trajectory (Beghetto, 2013) starting with an exploratory interest (“I like writing poems”), developing into an aspirational commitment (“I’m going to be a poet when I grow up”), and ultimately becoming part of one’s personal identity (“I’m a poet”).

As young people develop their creative identity they are also developing their competence related to that creative activity. Competence development takes many years of intense, deliberate practice (Ericsson, 1996). Along the way, young people will experience various setbacks. These setbacks can range from being told they are performing a rehearsed skill incorrectly, making mistakes during a performance, or being told by a teacher or coach that they are not ready to advance to the next level. Such setbacks occur in various contexts (e.g., group practice sessions; public performance; one-on-one interactions with teachers, parents, and coaches) and serve as opportunities to identify strengths and build on weaknesses. In this way, developing competence involves learning from both successes and failures.

Accomplished creators have learned how to receive and act on negative performance-related outcomes and feedback (Bandura, 1997; Beghetto, 2013; Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010). Moreover, a celebrated trait of many accomplished creators is that they have “defied the crowd” (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995) in pursuit of their creative aspirations. This involves being able to persist in one’s creative pursuits in the face of setbacks. Although working through setbacks is necessary for developing competence and ultimately one’s creative identity, not all young people experience setbacks in the same way.

Two children of similar ability levels may, for instance, experience a dance instructor’s negative critique in opposite ways. One may feel angered by the feedback and endeavor to practice twice as hard so as to prove the instructor wrong. The other may be so devastated by the comments that she loses the desire to dance ballet ever again. The latter experience refers to what has been called “creative mortification” (Beghetto, 2013, 2014). Creative mortification (CM) is the loss of one’s willingness to pursue a particular creative aspiration following a negative performance outcome (Beghetto, 2014). The experience of CM can stifle the development of one’s creative identity and result in talent loss (Hong & Milgram, 2008). Talent loss, in this context, refers to the failure of realizing one’s creative potential and can exact an immeasurable toll on aspiring creators.

Although it is possible for CM to occur anytime across the life span, young people—particularly those in the throes of adolescence—may be
more vulnerable to CM. Indeed, previous scholars have asserted that the transition from childhood to adolescence tends to be a critical time with respect to the abandonment of creative aspirations (see Albert, 1996, for a review). One reason this might be the case is that this period is marked by the development of one's identity and the experience of multiple sources of feedback on one's aspirations. A key question for researchers and practitioners interested in supporting young people's creative competence is: What factors lead to the mortification of their creative aspirations? The purpose of this short article is to explore this question by way of introducing an empirically testable model and applying that model to two brief examples.

**Process Model of Creative Mortification**

Creative mortification can be thought of as resulting from a confluence of factors. The process model displayed in Figure 7.1 elaborates on previous theoretical and empirical work (Beghetto, 2013, 2014) and highlights how several key factors can work together to result in CM.

As illustrated in Figure 7.1, we assert that CM can result from interpreting a negative performance outcome through the lens of internal attributions, fixed ability beliefs, and the experience of shame. We further assert that young people's level of aspirational commitment, the feedback they receive, and the sociocultural context can moderate their interpretations and experiences of negative performance outcomes and CM. In the following sections, we elaborate on these assertions.

**Negative Performance Outcomes.**

**Assertion 1:** Negative performance outcomes set the stage for creative mortification. The development of creative competence and, in turn, one's

---

**Figure 7.1. Process Model of Creative Mortification**

---
creative identity involves receiving and acting on performance-related feedback. Given that aspiring creators are still developing their competence, they are more likely to make mistakes compared to more competent creators. As a result, they are also more likely to receive negative, and potentially harsh, feedback (Bandura, 1997). The negative “feedback” on the deficient performance can come from various sources. Those sources include the self (e.g., self-judging the performance as falling short of how one imagined it would be), others (e.g., receiving devaluing feedback from parents, teachers, and coaches), or some combination thereof. Regardless of the source, we assert that if young people ultimately interpret a performance outcome in a negative light, then they will be vulnerable to experiencing CM.

Internal Attributions.

Assertion 2: Creative mortification results from an internal attribution of failure. As illustrated in Figure 7.1, the causal attributions a young person makes following a negative performance outcome will influence whether he or she will continue to pursue creative aspirations or, instead, experience CM. Two types of attributions are relevant to this model: global-self and external-other (Lewis & Sullivan, 2005; Weiner, 1985). Global-self attributions refer to blaming oneself for a failure (e.g., “I’m a complete failure... I’ll never be a dancer”). Conversely, external-other attributions refer to externalizing responsibility for the failure (e.g., “My dance instructor doesn’t like me and refuses to see my potential”). It is also possible for a person to attribute failure to a combination of internal and external causes (e.g., “I lack the talent and supportive teachers necessary to be a dancer”).

Of concern to CM is whether young people blame themselves for failure. When young people move beyond initial exploration of a domain (“I like dancing”) and move toward personally identifying with that domain (“I am a dancer”), then their creative aspirations become entangled with their developing identity. Consequently, when they experience negative performance outcomes they are more likely to be in a self-focused state of attention, which increases the chances of blaming themselves for failure (see Tracy & Robins, 2006). This makes them vulnerable to viewing those outcomes as a “global indictment of the self” (Lewis & Sullivan, 2005) and increases the likelihood of experiencing shame (see Assertion 4). When coupled with the belief that improvement is not possible (see Assertion 3), they may feel like they have run into a dead end and be more likely to abandon their creative aspirations.

Holding a Fixed Ability Belief.

Assertion 3: Fixed ability beliefs can lead to creative mortification. Young people interpret negative performance outcomes through the lens of the ability beliefs they hold. Carol Dweck (2006) has described these beliefs as “self-theories” or “mindsets.” She has distinguished two core ability beliefs: fixed (or entity) mindsets and growth (or incremental) mindsets. A fixed mindset refers to the belief that ability in a particular domain is static
and cannot improve. A growth mindset refers to the belief that one's ability can increase with effort. People who hold fixed beliefs tend to avoid subsequent performance opportunities after experiencing failure. Conversely, those who hold growth beliefs are motivated to improve upon past failures.

With respect to the development of creative aspirations, if young people hold fixed ability beliefs, then they will be more likely to give up on their creative aspirations after experiencing negative performance outcomes. Prior empirical work has provided initial support for this assertion (Beghetto, 2014) and this assertion also makes practical sense. Specifically, if young people hold a fixed mindset, then they likely would view the continued pursuit of a failed attempt as an exercise in futility. Consequently, they would be more likely to experience CM.

**Experiencing Shame.**

Assertion 4: Young people who experience shame likely will experience creative mortification. Young people will be more likely to experience CM if they experience shame as a result of a negative performance outcome. This assertion has its basis in existing programs of research that have described the stifling impact that experiencing shame can have on subsequent behavior (Lewis & Sullivan, 2005; Scheff, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2006) and prior theoretical and empirical work that has linked shame to CM (Beghetto, 2013, 2014).

Shame is a powerful, negative self-conscious emotion. Self-conscious emotions differ from basic emotions (like anger, fear, sadness) because they result from attributing events and outcomes to internal causes (see Assertion 2; Lewis & Sullivan, 2005; Tracy & Robins, 2006). The experience of shame can trigger an intense and lasting avoidant response. As Lewis and Sullivan (2005) have explained, “all that someone can do when shamed is attempt somehow to be rid of it” (p. 190). If young people experience shame as the result of pursuing a creative aspiration, then they will be more vulnerable to abandoning that aspiration.

**Creative Mortification.**

Assertion 5: Creative mortification results from experiencing shame, holding fixed ability beliefs, and making internal attributions of failure following a negative performance outcome. Taken together, we assert that CM will result from a combination of subjective interpretations of a negative performance outcome (Assertion 1)—specifically, blaming oneself for failure (Assertion 2), holding fixed ability beliefs (Assertion 3), and experiencing shame (Assertion 4). We also recognize that the experience of CM can be moderated by various factors, including differing levels of commitment to a creative aspiration (Assertion 7), the feedback one receives after a negative performance outcome (Assertion 8), and one’s sociocultural context (Assertion 9).

**Creative Continuance.**

Assertion 6: Young people will be more likely to continue pursuing their creative aspiration if they externalize failure, hold growth beliefs, and do not feel
shamed by negative performance outcomes. There are various factors that can result in creative continuance. With respect to our process model, the key factors that we have specified include externalizing failure, holding growth beliefs, and not feeling shamed. Some of these factors (e.g., growth mindset) are more positive and sustainable than others (e.g., externalizing failure). If one’s competence is low, for instance, a young person may ignore or externalize that failure. Indeed, there is evidence that incompetence may be a key factor in overestimating one’s actual ability (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). It is possible, however, that externalizing failure can, at times, be adaptive. A young person may, for instance, view a critique as unjust, brush it away, and even use it as motivation (e.g., “I will prove that teacher wrong...I will be a poet!”). Still, externalizing critiques is not a sustainable long-term strategy. Rather, in order to develop creative aspirations into creative accomplishments, young people need to take ownership of their negative performance outcomes so they can build on their strengths and address their weaknesses (Bandura, 1997; Beghetto, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013).

Aspirational Commitment.

Assertion 7: Variations in aspirational commitment will moderate creative mortification. We define aspirational commitment (AC) as the level of interest, personal investment, and competence a young person has in a particular creative pursuit. Our conceptualization is informed by prior theory and research on interest development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, 2002). Along these lines, we posit that differing levels of aspirational commitment will moderate the experience of CM. Specifically, we would predict that a young person with low or superficial aspirational commitment (e.g., “writing poetry is fun”), would be less likely to experience CM after a negative outcome because he or she is not personally invested in poetry and thereby may not internalize the failure or experience shame.

We would further predict that a young person with a deeply established commitment to his or her aspiration would also be buffered from mortification but for a different reason. Deeply established aspirational commitment entails fully identifying with the creative endeavor (e.g., “I am a poet”) and being recognized by others as assuming that creative identity (e.g., “You are a poet”). By the time a young person has developed deep aspirational commitment he or she would likely have also developed competence in that domain. We assert that competence can promote resilience and thereby buffer the experience of CM. Indeed, people with greater domain expertise tend to gravitate toward and respond more favorably to negative feedback (see Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2011). It is, of course, possible for a young person to believe that he is a poet and even have others tell him he is a poet but have low levels of actual competence. In such a situation, we would classify that person as being more vulnerable to CM in the long run than someone who has developed actual competence. Real-world constraints eventually catch up with misperceived levels of competence.
Finally, we would predict that young people with more moderate levels of aspirational commitment would be most vulnerable to experiencing CM. One reason is because they have started identifying with the domain (e.g., “I want to be a poet”) and thereby would be more likely to internalize a negative performance outcome but have not developed enough competence to buffer themselves from CM. They thereby might be more susceptible to domain-specific clichés that endorse fixed ability beliefs (e.g., “some people are born to be great poets”) and more susceptible to the experience of shame following negative performance outcomes (e.g., “I guess I’m not the poet I thought I was . . .”).

Feedback

Assertion 8: Feedback (from self or others) will moderate experiences of creative mortification. Feedback likely plays a critical role in how young people interpret and experience performance outcomes. Feedback can influence whether young people blame themselves (or external circumstances) for failure and setbacks in pursuit of their aspirations (Assertions 1 and 2). Feedback can also influence whether young people believe improvement is possible (Dweck, 2006, Assertion 3), the emotions they experience (Lewis & Sullivan, 2005; Tracy & Robins, 2006; Assertion 4), and ultimately their experience of CM (Assertion 5). We thereby assert that feedback (from oneself and others) can serve as either a buffer or a catalyst in the process of CM.

Sociocultural Context.

Assertion 9: Sociocultural context will moderate experiences of creative mortification. Context matters when it comes to how young people interpret negative performance outcomes. Indeed, motivational beliefs and emotional reactions are somewhat malleable and can be influenced by the particular sociocultural features of a performance environment. A growth versus fixed mindset, for instance, can be influenced by the kinds of feedback received before and after a performance (Dweck, 2006). Moreover, certain performance domains may have their own well-established norms for critiquing performance (e.g., “You have to have thick skin to be successful in this profession”). Familiarity and endorsement of those norms may temper the way young people experience negative performance outcomes. In short, the sociocultural context matters. Consequently, we predict that the particular temporal, spatial, and sociocultural features of a given context will play a nontrivial role in shaping how young people interpret and experience negative performance outcomes.

Applying the Model

At this point, it may be helpful apply the model to two brief examples. One example highlights how a negative performance outcome can result in
the mortification of creative aspirations and the other highlights how it can result in the continuance of creative aspirations.

**Creative Mortification Example.** The following example is based on a vignette published in the *Rhode Island Schoolmaster* (DeMunn & Snow, 1865, p. 88). The vignette focuses on a child (Jane) who had aspirations to become a singer. One day as Jane was singing with her classmates, her teacher stopped her and asked, “Jane, what are you trying to sing? The tune sung by the old cow when she died? What a discord!” Jane stopped singing in this moment “dropped her head upon the desk, and the bitter tears ran down her cheeks” (DeMunn & Snow, 1865, p. 88). Her classmates laughed at the teacher’s remark and then continued to sing without Jane. Seeing how Jane reacted, the teacher was sorry for the remark and thought Jane would soon forget about it. Jane did not forget, “the remembrance of those words would always remain with Jane, to keep her, in future, from the vain attempt to sing” (DeMunn & Snow, 1865, p. 88). Even though Jane “cherished the idea of becoming a singer” she would no longer pursue her aspiration and, instead, chose to “bury the desire, rather than subject herself to ridicule again.” (DeMunn & Snow, 1865, p. 88).

Working backwards from our model, we can see how this is an example of CM. Specifically, Jane, an aspiring singer, “buried the desire” to become a singer after one particular negative performance outcome. Moreover, that moment “remained with her” and kept her from pursuing the “vain attempt” to become a singer. Jane’s behavioral response following the negative performance outcome (i.e., dropping her head on the desk, bitter tears running down her face) is consistent with an experience of shame (Lewis & Sullivan, 2005). She also seemed to hold a fixed mindset about her singing ability (i.e., becoming a singer was now viewed as a *vain attempt*). Finally, Jane seems to have internalized the outcome.

We would further posit that her teacher’s feedback and Jane’s level of aspiration commitment played moderating roles. Her teacher ridiculed her efforts, which in turn seemed to strongly influence how Jane interpreted and experienced her performance. With respect to aspirational commitment, we would characterize Jane as having a moderate level of commitment (i.e., wanting to become a singer, but with limited experience in the domain). We would therefore assert that her moderate level of aspirational commitment increased her vulnerability to CM. Finally, we would argue that the sociocultural context also played a moderating role. Given that the triggering event occurred in a setting to which she would need to return and involved people who represent a legitimate authority (teacher) and peer group (classmates), this likely intensified her feelings of shame and motivated her to abandon her aspiration to become a singer.

**Creative Continuance Example.** The second example focuses on creative continuance. The highly accomplished composer Steven Sondheim recounted in a 2010 radio interview a key formative experience he had with his mentor Oscar Hammerstein (Alvarez & Howard, 2010). When
Sondheim was 15, he had the creative aspiration to become a show-tune composer. He had written a school musical and asked Hammerstein for feedback. Sondheim wanted a candid critique and therefore asked Hammerstein, “Pretend you don’t know me and it had just crossed your desk.” In response, Hammerstein said, “well in that case I have to tell you it is the worst thing I have ever read” (Alvarez & Howard, 2010). Clearly, this is a negative performance outcome. If the interaction stopped at this moment, Sondheim may have given up on his creative aspiration.

Instead, Hammerstein provided detailed feedback of how Sondheim could improve the work. As Sondheim explained, “he treated me like an adult and he did it as an encouragement” (Alvarez & Howard, 2010). Sondheim further explained, “he went through it page by page . . . [and I] probably learned more about song writing for theatre that afternoon than most writers probably learn in a lifetime” (Alvarez & Howard, 2010). We would assert that this detailed, improvement-oriented feedback communicated a growth mindset. Consequently, even if Sondheim did internalize the negative outcome, he was receiving the message that improvement was possible.

Finally, we would assert that although Sondheim’s aspirational commitment may have been at a moderate level (making him more vulnerable to CM), the sociocultural context afforded one-on-one coaching and feedback to help buffer him from viewing the situation through the lens of fixed ability beliefs or from feeling the self-conscious hurtful emotion of shame. As Sondheim explained, “it was a disappointment, not a hurt.”

**Concluding Thoughts**

There are various experiences in childhood and adolescence that can influence the development of young people’s creative aspirations. In this short article, we have focused on one experience: creative mortification. CM is a subjective affair. It can therefore be quite subtle and occur without notice from others. We have attempted to draw attention to this phenomenon and introduced an empirically testable model that researchers can use to examine the process by which CM seems to occur. The model contributes new insights into how existing motivational and emotional constructs can be used to understand why some young people may abandon their creative aspirations. It thereby highlights potential areas for how researchers and practitioners might further clarify the process and, ultimately, develop ways to help young people avoid or rebound from mortifying experiences.

We recognize that many questions remain. One question worth exploring is whether certain aspects of CM can be adaptive. Leitner, Hehman, Deegán, and Jones (2014) have, for instance, described “adaptive disengagement” as a way to protect one’s self-esteem from negative social feedback. Indeed, adaptive disengagement may resolve the dissonance experienced from receiving negative performance-related feedback. On the downside, disengagement may run the risk of the young person becoming unreceptive
to helpful, albeit negative, feedback. As such, practitioners play a key role in helping young people learn how to receive and, when necessary, act on feedback associated with negative performance outcomes. Indeed, providing and helping young people learn how to receive honest (i.e., understand real-world requirements necessary for creative accomplishment) and supportive feedback (i.e., what specifically they can do to improve upon their current level of competence) seems like a viable way to support the development of creative potential (Beghetto, 2007; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007).

Additional questions in need of empirical exploration include: Are certain developmental time periods (e.g., transition to adolescence) more critical than others with respect to being vulnerable to CM? Do the effects of a particularly intense CM experience generalize to related performance domains (e.g., an intense experience of CM in poetry resulting in avoiding other forms of creative writing)? What personal or environmental factors might help young people better cope with negative performance outcomes and experience them in a more adaptive and positive way? What role might practitioners play in ameliorating the potentially damaging self-beliefs and negative self-evaluative emotions experienced by young people who face setbacks and real-world constraints in pursuit of their creative aspirations? And under what conditions might young people who have experienced CM return to their former aspirations (including learning how to reframe untenable aspirations into creative hobbies or avocations)?

With further testing and refinement of the model introduced herein, researchers will be in a better position to help young people learn and grow from setbacks. In doing so, more young people might realize the benefits of developing creative aspirations into creative identities.

Notes

1. The process model highlights factors asserted to increase the likelihood of CM. We are not asserting that one variable necessarily causes another (e.g., fixed beliefs cause shame). Rather, CM is simply more likely when all the relevant variables are present.

2. Beghetto (2014) found that CM was uniquely predicted by fixed creative ability beliefs (e.g., “Your artistic ability was not sufficient”) and the experience of shame (assessed by a measure adapted from Tracy & Robins, 2006).

3. These examples are adapted from examples and discussion presented in Beghetto (2013).

References


**Ronald A. Beghetto** is professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut.

**Anna E. Dilley** is a PhD student at the University of Connecticut. She received her BA and BS from Purdue University.