**Idea Navigation: The Role of Affect in How Groups Develop Ideas\***

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**Abstract.** Doing creative work is often deeply emotional. Research on group creativity and innovation has, however, conceptualized creativity as primarily cognitive. This view assumes that affect and emotions are either incidental to or dysfunction for group creativity, but a growing body of work hints at the broader role of affect and emotions in how groups elaborate and develop ideas. I use an inductive qualitative account of eight contemporary circus groups to demonstrate the role of affect. Specifically, I discuss how affect establishes shaky grounds for creative work, create generative momentum to energize and sustain groups, and create space for questioning in the creative process.

*“When we are making a movie, the movie doesn’t exist yet. We are not uncovering it or discovering it; it’s not as if it resides somewhere and is just waiting to be found. There is no movie… In a fundamental way, the movie is hidden from us. I know this can feel overwhelming. There is a reason that writers talk about the terror of the blank page… It’s extremely difficult to create something out of nothing...navigating between the known and the unknown.”*

– Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar (Catmull & Wallace, 2014)

Creative endeavours, from building start-ups to creating artworks, involve a process of evolving and developing an initial idea or insight. For groups to generate creative output, they need to bridge the non-trivial gap between an initial idea and a fully, ambiguously specified one which is ready for implementation. Scholars of creativity have referred to this process between idea generation and idea implementation as idea elaboration (Mainemelis, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, & Sawyer, 2014) or idea development (McMahon et al., 2016; Rouse, 2018). This process of navigating between the initial seed of an idea and the implementation of it is, as Catmull suggested, fraught with uncertainty and from the terrors of the blank page to the joys of discoveries, deeply emotional [Testing out here. This is a test. Testing. Fun. West.].

That affect is consequential for creativity is well-established in existing research (e.g. Amabile et al., 2005). Doyle (1998) reveals in her study of fiction writers, for instance, that beyond just having the initial ideas for writing, writers spoke of being affected and involved emotionally throughout the process of developing characters for their novels. Creativity research has traditionally been heavily cognitive (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009), thus affect is primarily viewed as incidental to the creative process, typically improving creativity by facilitating individual cognitive processes thought to be at the heart of creativity (e.g. Isen et al., 1987; Fong, 2006). As such, understanding about how affect influences individual creativity is not sufficient for understanding the how affective states embedded in the interactions of groups influences collective creativity.

There are several terms often used in research on affect and creativity, ranging from emotions, to moods, to dispositional traits, to meta-emotional abilities such as emotional intelligence. Affect can be thought of as an encompassing umbrella that covers both feeling states, which are short-term affective experiences, and feeling traits, which are more stable tendencies to feel and act in certain ways (Watson & Clark, 1984). Throughout this paper, I use the term *affect* to refer to such feelings, regardless of whether they are transient mood states or discrete moods resulting from specific events.

While research has traditionally focused on the role of idea generation (Paulus, 2000; Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002; Mumford, 2003), the work of elaborating, developing, and adapting ideas have long been recognized as being essential to generating creative outputs (Guilford, 1967; Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002). Despite this process being recognized as being essential for creativity (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988; Finke et al., 1992; Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002), there is surprisingly little research on it (for notable exceptions see Kohn et al., 2011; Harvey, 2013; and McMahon et al., 2016) and in particular, we little about how affect shapes this process. Theoretical work suggests that idea elaboration as a stage or phase in the creative process requires different kinds of social and contextual factors to be effective. For instance, Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017) suggested that a key factor in creators’ ability to elaborate ideas is how successful they are in managing negative affect that arises from uncertainty about quality of ideas. Similarly, Mainemelis (2010) points out the importance of psychological safety in allowing individuals to pursue novel ideas.

These works assume, however, that one individual is primarily responsible for developing and pushing ideas forward, and are thus not intended to explain how groups with relatively flat hierarchies develop creative ideas. This is an important oversight because in today’s rapidly changing workplace, small and diverse groups are an increasingly common mode of generating creative solutions (Hargadon, & Bechky, 2006). Specific to collective creativity, there is increasingly evidence that groups excel and outperform individuals at developing ideas (Kohn et al., 2011; Harvey, 2013, McMahon et al., 2016), whereas they may fall behind individuals in number of ideas generated (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003) or novelty of ideas selected (Rietzschel et al., 2006). These findings indicate that examining the role of affect in how groups navigate ideas may be a productive avenue to further our understanding of collective creativity.

**Navigating the idea maze**

I use the term *idea navigation* to describe the process through which groups specify initial ideas or insights over time. Navigation is a suitable metaphor for the process because first, it emphasizes the non-linear, recursive nature of the creative process reminiscent of finding one’s way through a winding maze (Lubart, 2001; Srinivasan, 2013), and second, it highlights the dual challenge groups face in this process: staying on course in order to arrive at a coherent product while simultaneously remaining open and flexible to replotting the course based on new insights (Zhou & George, 2003). This conceptualization of idea navigation is reflected in naturalistic accounts of creativity (e.g. Doyle, 1998) as well as interdisciplinary work on innovation showing that the process is often open-ended and requires on-going interpretation to surface the core concept (Buchanan, 1992; Lester & Piore, 2009; Stark, 2009).

Idea navigation can be distinguished from idea elaboration, which is often used in existing literature as a static outcome measure of creativity (Torrance, 1982). I view this process through groups develop, transform, and refine ideas as inherently generative as creative ideas emerge and existing ideas take on novel directions (Zhou & George, 2003; Mainemelis, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 2014; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Rouse, 2018). Idea navigation involves evaluation in that groups need to converge around some ideas they deem worthy of further pursuit to develop and to decide which of several possible direction is the more worthwhile to continue in. Whereas idea evaluation is the primarily cognitive process of validating ideas against a task criteria (Amabile, 1996), idea navigation also captures the interactional and affective dynamics within creative groups.

**Affect and creativity**

There has been substantial interest in recent years in the relationship between affect and workplace performances, especially with regards to workplace creativity (Shalley et al., 2004; Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Most of the work on affect and creativity has been done in the context of individuals, where, reflecting a larger trend in studies of affect and work-related performances, attention has been focused on individual’s dispositional affect (see James et al., 2004 for a review).

The dominant view is that there is a positive association between experiencing positive affect and creativity (Amabile et al., 2005; Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Meta-analyses on mood and creativity support the broad conclusion that positive affective enhances creativity (Baas et al., 2008; Davis, 2009). Positive affect is seen to enhance creativity primarily because it allows individuals to make connections between divergent materials, use broader categories, and see more associations among stimuli (Isen, 1987). More specifically, positive affect is thought to moderate and enhance the cognitive processes linked to creativity (e.g. George & Zhou, 2002; Madjar et al., 2002). Mood as information theory also posits that affective states can be interpreted as providing information or signals about situations that influences cognitive processing (George & Zhou, 2007; Schwarz & Clore, 2003).

The impact of negative affect on creativity represents more complexity and less consensus. There is evidence that under different conditions, negative affect can hinder creativity (Baas et al., 2008), have no effect (Grawitch et al., 2003) or help creativity (Zhou & George, 2001). De Dreu et al. (2008) suggest a dual pathway model to parse the complexities, where not only hedonic tone of mood states (i.e. positive vs negative) but also their activation (activating vs deactivating) need to be taken in account. Specifically when activating moods have a negative tone, they positively impacts creativity through increased persistence. In addition to negative affect, there is some limited evidence that emotional ambivalence, or the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotions, allow individuals to better recognize unusual relationships between concepts and thus be more creative (Fong, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a nascent literature on collective affect and creativity. There studies validate and emphasize the existence of group or shared affect – that is, a group’s affective state that arises from the combinations of individual-level affective factors as well as group- or contextual-level factors that mold the affect experience of the group (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). These studies also show that positive group affect has a salient impact on creativity (Grawitch et al., 2003). Positive affect encourages groups to explore whereas negative affect suppresses exploration (Knight, 2013). They focus on understanding how affect becomes shared within groups through processes such as emotional contagion, where one individual’s affect can be transferred to others, so that group members share the same affective states (Barsade, 2002). Affect becomes shared through collective, coordinated activity that members engage in together (Totterdall, 2000), and collective affect is constructed through observable displays of inner affective states (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000).

A key emergent insight is the reciprocal and dynamic nature of affect in groups, with several theoretical models of group affect and creativity incorporating a feedback mechanism to explain the role of affect (e.g. Kelly & Barsade, 2001; Walter & Bruch, 2008; Harvey, 2014). For example, Walter and Bruch (2008) proposed that positive affect in groups forms a self-reinforcing spiral with relationship quality; and Harvey (2014) proposed that enacting ideas and positive affect forms a feedback loop through a sense of progress. This suggests affect works in a circular, reciprocal way which is difficult to discretize and confine to stages. This is not surprising considering that it has shown that that affect and cognitions tended to form feedback loops (Izard et al., 1988) and that dynamic cycles of affect mirrors the creative process itself as being cycles rather than sequential stages (Lubart, 2001; Harrison & Rouse, 2014).

Most studies on the link between affect and creativity, across the literature on individual and groups, focus exclusively on the relationship between affect and idea generation (e.g. Kurtzberg, 2005; Grawitch et al., 2003; Rhee, 2006; Shin, 2014) and tell us little about how the role of affect in navigating ideas. This is important as different affective processes or states may facilitate different aspects of collective creativity. Perry-Smith and Coff (2011) suggest, for example, that different mood states support generation and selection of ideas, indicating that there are variances and nuances within the creative process despite general positive association. Notably missing in their model is an exploration of how affect might support idea navigation.

In addition, majority of these studies are conducted in experimental settings where affect is artificially induced to focus on how affect move from individual-level to group level (Barsade & Gibson, 1998; Barsade, 2002), instead of examining how emotions that arise organically during interactions are interwoven into the creative process and influences idea navigation. As such, how affect shapes the process of idea navigation in groups is still an open question.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

A growing body of qualitative work on real groups in context is replete with examples and descriptions of groups engaging in activities intended to clarify, refine, build and integrate initial creative ideas. These works demonstrate the importance of interactional and situational dynamics of the groups in understanding how groups navigate ideas and provide some hints of a broader role of affect in this process.

First, affect provides a method for groups members to communicate and share their responses to ideas. As groups navigate ideas, new insights and reframing of problems may occur and thus standards are likely to be emergent and evolving through the process. This may make it challenging for groups to communicate their perceptions of ideas using primarily cognitively-oriented expression. For example, in a study of modern dancers, Harrison and Rouse (2015) find that expressing emotional, visceral reactions that are explicitly subjective provided cues about how individuals responded to an idea. These emotional cues are seen as interchangeable with more cognitively oriented expressions and allowed individuals to communicate their interest or disinterest without having to fully specify the rationale behind them. These affectively-charged expressions formed part of a set of interactions that makes it possible for groups to explore the problem space in a flexible way.

This example also suggests that communicating explicitly responses via affective cues or expressions (e.g. that’s cool, I like it, etc.) may be useful for navigating ideas because it dampens the fear of negative feedback. Existing research show that awareness and inducing of positive affect or limiting of negative affect is important in feedback interactions in the creative process, as positive affect motivates the receiver and encourages exploration (Zhou & George, 2003; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). But in this case, expressing both positive and negative affective content seems to be useful as cues and allows groups to share their responses in the process of exploration (Harrison & Rouse, 2015).

Second, affect may function as an alternative path of group convergence to a more cognitive approach based on convergent decision-making. In order to develop ideas, groups need to converge around some initial ideas as worthy of further pursuit. This challenge is described by a designer in a study of creativity in modern dancers as follows:

“Often, after the brainstorming process is done, it’s difficult to pick the “best” idea to “run” with. Usually, a few strong directions emergence and picking a direction is a bit arbitrary. (Harrison & Rouse, 2015)

Some studies suggest that when groups are faced with highly ambiguous situations with uncertain outcomes, groups are able to converge around and engage with some ideas or problems, despite having different perspectives by letting shared affective states such as excitement or enthusiasm, rather than cognitive functions, drive the process (Majchrzak et al., 2012; Metiu & Rothbard, 2013). This view of affect as a way for groups to converge around some ideas and move forward in certain directions is in line with research on how in ambiguous situations, affect is an effective rather than dysfunctional pathway of making decisions (Huang & Pearce, 2015; Rivera, 2015).

For instance, Majchrzak et al. (2012) find that as members in cross functional teams spend more time in lengthy discourse they being to experience increasing anxiety and uncertainty about whether they will reach a solution and these experiences can lead to exhaustion or withdrawal. They avoid this by letting affect rather than cognition (e.g. evaluation) drive the process – converging around ideas members all show enthusiasm for and ignoring others. Similarly, Elsbach and Kramer (2003) showed that positive affect can used as an alternative mechanism to converge about the quality of an object where people hold different perspectives or standards. As such, groups can converge on ideas they share positive affect around, without necessarily verbalizing the rationale or being explicitly aligned in their perspectives.

Finally, affect may facilitate idea navigation by influencing group motivation and energy. Harvey (2014) suggests that enacting ideas may enhance the perception that that things are progressing in a conceptually coherent way and groups tend to experience positive affect. This likely creates a feedback loop where the feeling of progress induces positive effect (Amabile & Kramer, 2011) and positive affect in turn encourages explorations and further enacting.

In what Rouse (2018) terms “generative energy”, affective states such as excitement and engagement bring about a sense of energy and fluidity to the idea development process in groups. Positive group affective states and shared feelings of excitement are seen as driving forces to encourage creators to explore especially in situations where outcomes or quality of potential ideas are highly ambiguous (Gish et al., 2009; Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010). Positive affect is also crucial in providing generative energy and emotional support that allow creators to focus on engaging with the ideas and forging ahead, which helps them move past the frequent huddles of feeling stuck and uninspired in the creative process (Majchrzak et al., 2012; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Rouse, 2018).

For example, Metiu and Rothbard (2013) finds that shared positive affect sustained engagement while people were solving problems together and the joy of having solved the problem also gave them an energy boost to continue with their work. In this case, shared affect is seen both as an outcome and reinforcer of groups engagement with problems, echoing the emerging perspective in the affect and creativity literature that affect is dynamic and recursive (Kelly & Barsade, 2001).

Studies such as those discussed above point to the importance of affect in facilitating idea navigation through the often long, tedious, and uncertain process of doing idea work (Gish et al., 2009), yet how affective processes develop within and interact with idea navigation is unclear. In particular, we know little about how affect support groups in the challenges in navigating ideas of making progress toward a coherent solution while remaining flexible and open. Thus, the present paper aims to systematically explore affect in group creative process; asking, in particularly, how does affect shape how groups navigate ideas.

**Research Setting: Contemporary Circus Arts**

I study how groups navigate ideas in the performing arts domain, specifically in the contemporary circus arts industry. Contemporary circus different from traditional circus in that the focus is primarily on narrative and storytelling rather than animals and extraordinary feats (Leslie & Rantisi, 2011). Among contemporary circus groups, innovation has become a key comparative advantage as it is now no longer sufficient to be the most proficient in physical feats and groups need to create works that are highly original in order to secure opportunities and funding. In addition, contemporary circus has become increasingly cross-disciplinary, fusing traditional circus feats with dance, singing, choreography, and even technology. This requires integrating knowledge and skills across domains, combining and recombining them to create something new – the essence of creative pursuits.

The nature of creating contemporary circus works is also such that at the beginning of the process, groups often have no idea what they are trying to make and are unable to articulate what they think the end product will look like. As such, industry insiders are keenly aware of the importance of navigating ideas. This is reflected in the way that the industry conceptualizes the creative process and practically structure its funding allocations. For the majority of works, the process starts with what is known to industry insiders as “research and development” or R&D where initial ideas are proposed, developed, tested. This makes it clear that the phenomenon I set out to study is indeed present and at least partly recognized by my informants.

**Methods**

I use an inductive, qualitative approach to study how affect shapes the process of idea navigation. Given that this study focuses on how creative groups develop and elaborate ideas, my unit of analysis is the process occurring after ideas have been generated, through which groups converges around idea to retain or further develop it. I am examining the on-going interactions of groups. As such, I treat episode or session or developing ideas in my data as a case, analysing patterns of interactions to describe similarities that groups go through in the process. I develop the cases from over 150 hours of ethnographic observations spent with eight contemporary circus groups, unstructured ad-hoc interviews with 30 individuals, and archival documents in the form of grant proposals for the projects I was observing. As existing theory is not meant to answer the question raised in this study and since we know relatively little about how groups navigate ideas, interviews and ethnographic observations and in-depth case study are appropriate for investigating and theorizing about this process that is not yet thoroughly researched (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

**Data Collection**

I gained access to eight circus groups through a combination of cold-emailing, referrals from existing informants, and referrals from influential institutional actors. Table 1 summarizes information about these groups, including observation time spent with each group. Of these eight groups, two are National Portfolio Organizations in the U.K., which are a group of arts organizations that receive regular funding from the U.K. Arts Council represent some of the best arts practice in the world (Arts Council England, 2018); one of the groups is funded with an artist grant awarded to only one circus artist in Finland every five years; two of the groups are relatively established companies from the U.K. and Finland, and the remaining groups are relatively young companies comprising of artists from the U.K., Sweden, Spain, and Portugal. The groups I selected reflect varying levels of experience and commercial success and this allows me to observe if these factor into how groups evaluate ideas.

I arranged my observations to coincide with the earliest stage of development for new performances, which is referred to as “research and development” by industry insiders. During this stage, groups often have only an extremely vague idea of what they plan to create and even this overarching idea is subject to change during the creative process. As such, I was able to observe groups in conditions where they have to develop ideas and re-frame problems in an on-going way. While on site, I took digital photographs and kept short-form jottings on paper and on a smartphone. I expanded the jottings into long-form field notes, appended with my own methodological journal and analytical memos in the form approximately as described in Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011).

I initially conducted semi-structure pre-interviews with informants prior to observations but soon discovered that while people were eager to talk about their creative processes, it was better suited to questions about individual creativity because firstly, recollection of the creative process is often vague and simplified, lacking in the rich detail that would allow for an analysis of process and secondly, it only allowed me access to the individual’s perspective or reconstruction of what transpired and did not allow me firsthand observations of the very thing I was interested in – on-going interactions and evaluative moments. I eventually abandoned the pre-interviews and opted instead for real-time interviews conducted ad hoc in the course of the creative process, often interviewing the group rather than individuals to capture shared dynamics and meanings.

In the beginning I recorded interviews but because the groups were working easily eight hours or more at a time and my interviews and follow-up clarifications range anywhere between five minutes when they are taking a water break to two hours over lunch, and frequently clarifications happen spur of the moment in the midst of activities, these factors render recording logistically infeasible. Instead I relied on pen-and-paper field notes for quick conversations or typing on a Bluetooth keyboard directly onto my phone for longer interviews or observations. I reviewed my notes at the end of each day, expanded them into longer form field notes, and wrote analytical memos at the conclusion of each field visit.

**Data Analysis**

The bulk of my analysis focuses on observational data because the nature of group idea navigation is inherently interactional. In addition, relying too heavily on individual’s perception and retrospective reconstruction of process would likely be less useful as people are often not able to attribute events correctly (Pettigrew, 1979). I coded field notes for convergence around ideas and patterns of behaviors surrounding ideas that later emerge as worthy of further exploration. Following Charmaz’s (2014) approach to constructing grounded theory, I developed coding categories inductively and used initial codes to aid further data collection. I coded interviews and field notes line by line, and allowed the categories to emerge, paying particular attention to behaviors and interactions surrounding ideas that groups converge on and gets developed. During this stage, I noticed distinct patterns of interaction around ideas that groups share excitement for and those that groups do not share excitement for. Following this stage, I developed secondary codes to capture the affective patterns embedded in group interactions. These then formed the aggregate dimensions which explains the role of affect in the process of navigating ideas.

**Table 1. Observation sites**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Group name | Description | Observation time (approx.) |
| A | 4-person group of experienced performers and riggers working in an educational setting | 5 hrs. |
| B | 2-person group with more than 10 years of performing and touring experience | 16 hrs. |
| C | 2-person group with shows currently touring in different parts of Europe | 23 hrs. |
| D | 2-person group working with support from 5-year grant from the Finnish government | 20 hrs. |
| E | 4-person group consisting of performers with varying levels of experience working as a new company | 5 hrs. |
| F | 3-person group in relatively young company working with support from government arts funding | 21 hrs. |
| G | 10-person group of performers and director working as part of a National Portfolio Organization | 4 hrs. |
| H | 3-person group which has been a National Portfolio Organization for more than 10 consecutive years | 10 hrs. |

\* Throughout the paper, groups are denoted by letters A through H, and each individual member in the group is identified by a number following the letter. Thus, A-3 is the 3rd of 4 members in group A.

**Findings**

Affect plays three important roles in the process of navigating ideas: (1) Establishing shaky ground (2) creating generative momentum and (3) creating space for questioning. The data structure is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Data Structure**

1st Order Concepts 2nd Order Concepts Aggregate Dimensions

Building optimism

Creating space for questioning

Creating generative momentum

Establishing shaky grounds

Surfacing disconnections s

Scoping

Creating pause

Converging

Energizing

Suggesting arbitrary rules or parameters to limit navigation. Highlight practical constraints and things that they do not want instead of things that they want.

Statements from group members indicating confusion or lack of understanding. Questions meant to clarify connections between ideas. Questions meant to clarify overall goal.

Navigation grinding to a halt when groups members have conflicting affective responses. Tension arise, and groups cannot move forward.

Statements framing the navigation as play. Deferring decisions to maintain flow of interactions. Shared affect transforms the pacing of interactions, with positive affect comes more action.

Expressing explicitly affective, subjective responses. Proceeding with ideas that garner excitement from the entire group. Dropping ideas that not everyone is excited about.

Highlighting ambiguity

Statements about the possibilities and opportunities arising from not pre-specifying the end-product. Anticipating and experiencing excitement and satisfaction that arise from new ideas and directions.

Statements about not know what the end-goal or product should be. Shared frustration from not knowing if progress is being made; anxiety about quality; dejection about the fundamental value of the project.

**Establishing shaky ground**

**Highlight ambiguity.** At the outset, groups were always emphatic that they would not specify in advance what the end-product will look like, and that they often did not or could not even unambiguously say what the show was to be about. As one informant describes: “At every point in the process there are lots and lots of possibilities and it’s unclear what the show is going to look like at the end. In more traditional theatre type work you may need to commit to, say, a set two years before the showing so a lot of it is already fixed. But in circus R&D… [mimic an attempt at holding on to something shapeless]. It’s really difficult to navigate that process. (F-2; 27)” Because the desired end product or goal cannot be unambiguously specified, groups often felt unsure of the value or quality of what they were doing as well as whether they were making progress. As a result, they experienced anxiety, frustration, and hopelessness. For example, the following exchange highlights how a group creating a show around the themes of immigration is plagued by uncertainties.

K-1; 20: I don’t know if [what we’re doing] is too… vain? I just don’t know. I don’t want the audience to be switched off… How? [groans and puts his head in his hands]

K-2; 20: I’m not sure… I guess dramaturgically it works because it comes from a place of honesty?

K-1; 20: Another big thing is, why should anyone care? Why should [we] be the ones saying all these? [sits down and lean forward with his forearm resting on his lap and his head hanging, looking down at his feet]

**Building optimism.** One of the things that initially struck me as surprising during my observations is how often groups expressed optimism about the opportunities and possibilities that arose from uncertainties, despite the anxieties and frustrations it seemed to be simultaneously causing them. Describing this open-ended process: “An experimental circus show can be about anything. That’s what makes it so exciting.” Later the same informants said of developing ideas for the show: “When you find something, you have a feeling, you’re so excited – you’ve discovered something!” (C-1; 27). While they often could not be sure whether an idea is going to be valuable, they often expressed optimism that elaborating and experimenting with an idea would open them up to new possibilities and directions even if their original intention did not work out. For example, one group had spent two days cutting up felt pieces to hang from the ceiling to test out an idea they had for a visual effect. This was quite a costly experiment as they had limited access to the venue they were doing R&D in. When asked how likely they thought the idea was going to pan out, an informant responded that, “We’re somewhat sure but also open to it bringing us somewhere else. It might inspire something else, or it might work better as something other than the original idea and that would be good too. (T-1; 4)”

**Creating generative momentum**

**Energizing groups to explore.** The process of adapting and refining ideas is rife with uncertainties and difficulties and groups have to be sufficiently energized to engage in it. Where groups were successful in doing so they framed the process not as an open-ended search plagued by uncertainty but as a high-energy activity that is inherently enjoyable and exciting. For instance, when asked what their plans for exploration were for the day, an informant responded: “I don’t know what we’re going to do today… We’re going to play! It’s always fun [laughs]. (H-3; 11)” Later in the same conversation, the group discussed an idea they had collectively engaged with and as they were talking through some of the possibilities with the idea, one group member said, “Let’s try it…. We can do some beating [a way to rotate your body in the air by building up momentum from a swinging motion] when we get higher, but let’s play with [the idea] for now. Let’s jam!” In framing the process as high energy, groups often used language that evokes the playing and playfulness, for instance, frequently encouraging exploration by saying “have a little play with [the equipment/the idea]” or referring to physically demanding activities such as aerial straps or partner acrobatics as “jumpy jumps” and “bouncing time”. Another way through which groups are energized through shared positive affect is changes in pacing of interactions. For example, this episode from my fieldnotes shows how positive affect can transform the pacing and energy in a group, encouraging groups to act on their ideas.

The group is trying to make some shapes with the silk while the photographer takes some picture of the space. The mood is still a bit down from the previous episode where the exploration seemed to head nowhere. Everyone seems a bit tired and it’s taking them a long time to make the shapes because they are moving slowly. The photographer suggests that, in the interest of time and efficiency, everyone will take turns to create some shapes and the rest will just follow. It doesn’t work very well initially, with members grumbling things like they can’t see what they’re doing or why certain shapes wouldn’t work. The photographer insists that they keep going and F-2 agrees, saying that “If we just don’t think about it we’ll get there”. Over the course of the next 15 minutes, they become more successful with the making the shapes. They are making more eye contact than before and there’s now much more vibrancy in the space. They are no longer dragging their feet and are moving much faster than before. Someone had an idea about wanting to move the ladder to the pulley to rig the silk in a different way and they immediately set about doing it. The lethargy is gone.

**Using shared excitement to converge around ideas.** Having a consensus about whether some ideas are worthy of investing more time and energy into is crucial in allowing groups to move forward with these ideas. I observed groups to build consensus using their shared excitement and enthusiasm rather than explicit criteria. For instance, the episode below illustrates the interactions around an idea that the group was excited about.

Lin explains the cat’s cradle, “It’s this children’s game where you have two pieces of string between your hands and you loop them back and forth in a pattern and make all sorts of shapes with them, such a rabbit or a broom.” Ros and Ann listened, rapt. Their bodies were leaning slightly forward toward Lin and their eyes were fixed on her. When she was done explaining, Ros picked up the thread of the conversation immediately: “Imagine making those shapes with our bodies, it’ll be so cool.” Ann, without missing a beat, agrees: “Yes we can do it with silk or rope and we can play with different shapes.” Lin throws out a suggestion: “We can try the simple broom shape first. You’ll see just bodies moving around in the space and nothing is happening and then suddenly – boom! You see a fully formed shape!” Ros nods and adds, “Yeah and you’ll still be able to see the ropes between them that’s connecting them.” The group continue in this way for around another five minutes, with Ann making one last suggestion about how cool it’ll be to play with the heights of the people making the shapes. At this point it was clear to everyone that this was what they will spend the afternoon on when they get back into the studio.

When the group shares a sense of excitement about the idea, they keep the idea alive by making suggestions that serve to extend, clarify, or build on the idea rather than alternatives to the idea. When an idea does not garner shared excitement, however, it is simply dropped from the conversation and typically never mentioned again. Converging around ideas using affective signals allows groups to move forward even if the end-goal may be ambiguous. In addition, groups members do not need to explicitly verbalize rationales for being excited about some ideas would may stop the momentum of the discussion or lead to disagreements.

**Creating space for questioning**

**Creating pause.** While positive affect energized groups and allowed them to move forward with, negative affect in the process often created pause as group members did not feel the same way about ideas or were not equally enthusiastic. For instance, the following episode illustrates how when group members have different subjective responses to ideas it gives rise to negative affect which creates tension and pause in the process.

C-2 performs some straps moves while rubbing the ink from her feet onto her legs, in a drawing motion. Immediately after she gets down from the straps she says, “I like it. I like the texture of it.” C-1 doesn’t say anything for quite a while – something really uncharacteristic for her as she is usually very responsive and vocal. She starts her sentence with “but” and then pauses. She finally says, “I don’t see the connection. I can find the connection I’m sure, but I can’t see it right now.” There was a few moments of tense silence and C-1 says again, “I’m happy to explore it a bit further if you feel it’s worthwhile, but I don’t know…” C-2 replies that, “I’d like to give it a go with proper materials. I don’t know where it’ll go, but I think it deserves one proper go”. C-1 looks away and says, “Yes but let’s be a bit more choosy”. They stop talking about the idea and were quiet for a while before deciding to finish up for the day by taking some videos for social media.

**Problematizing connections.** When groups collectively experience negative affect as they are unsure of where they are going in the creative process or the value of what they are doing, this leads them to surface and question the connections between ideas and how ideas are in turn related to the broader concept or theme of the project. In these situations, group members often problematize these connections by stating their confusion or incomprehension, and then asking questions such as “How is this related/connected?” or “What are we trying to achieve here?”

**Scoping.** Where they experienced negative affect, groups tended to scope the navigation process by setting some arbitrary rules or parameters or through delineating what they knew they did not want to achieve. For instance, after a slow, unexciting morning, a group was about to spend ten minutes improvising how to combine puppetry and aerial silks when one group member (F-2; 24) suggested that:” We should set some themselves some rules. For example, two things that have to happen during the improvisation, so that we’re not just completely doing random things.” They then went on to spend about 10 minutes discussing what the rules should be, even though this is not a standard practice for them. When they were frustrated they tended also to focus on the things that would not work or the things that they did not want to see rather than exploring why things could work or what they were looking forward to seeing. For instance, when an idea was brought up, an informant responded, “My idea now is to limit our ideas to the equipment we have now”.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine how affect shapes the process through which groups elaborate and develop ideas. To do so, I examined contemporary circus groups and focused on finding similarities across cases of idea navigation. I find that affect shapes how groups navigate ideas in three ways: by establishing a shaky foundation to explore ideas, creating generative momentum in groups, and by creating space for questioning throughout the creative process.

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