The paradox and potential of creativity among Michelin-starred chefs

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by

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Does occupational success and performance affect creativity in organizations that deal with food preparation, and if so how? We base our study in the *haute cuisine* industry that values creativity and on in-depth interviews with 14 Michelin-starred chefs in Europe, which we supplement with content analysis of media coverage and interpretation of archival performance data.

We assume sense-making of creativity as a circular flow through material-discursive practices (see Hultin & Mahring, 2017). Through the performativity of practices such as the pursuit and bestowing of Michelin stars (Barad, 2007), certain cooking practices and approaches become sensible to chefs and their stakeholders. Every Michelin star chef is simultaneously making sense of stakeholders, and vice versa. In this fashion, rather than as linear and agentic, we view creativity as holistic sense-making activities affecting and being affected by material and social environments. In our depiction, we aim to provide insight on “the paradoxical character of sense-making rather than reduce it to a sequence of stages or items” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 205: S22). We assume an entangled relation between social and material, studying practices as material-discursive (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). Agency becomes a circular flow that flows from actors but also molds them. Creativity becomes sense-making that occurs through interactions between people that negotiate, construct and co-construct meaning (Hultin and Mahring, 2017). Chefs have central positions in the circulating flow of agency, but so do materials and the incorporation of discourse. Recent research has broadened interactive environments to include non-human partners such as technologies and tools which we also adopt (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

Research indicates that chefs in *haute cuisine* view creativity as key to their success (Fauchart & Von Hippel; 2006; Hadida, 2015; Nicolini et al., 2003); our preliminary analysis further suggests that the chefs’ perceived performance also affects their creativity. We propose the achievement and pursuit of Michelin stars as performative measures: the stars presuppose the chefs and their practices they describe, deriving not from the chefs’ authority but through iterative processes and a social reiteration of authoritative cooking constructs. As central actors, we focus on Michelin-starred chefs’ creative processes: individual and original innovations pervade these high-end, fine-dining organizations that feature the finest-quality products and service, and require the chefs’ tacit and explicit knowledge to adapt and to survive. In contrast, other restaurant and food-service segments may use centralized R&D, pre-made products, and standardized menus across organizations.

The study of creativity has mostly fallen into the realm of psychology and cognition. Two major psychological, theoretical perspectives exist on individual creativity -- componential models (e.g., Amabile, 1996), and interactionist perspectives (e.g., Woodman, Sawyer & Griffin, 1993); neither perspective distinguishes between routine and radical creativity, which we view as the extent to which chefs meander from established discourse. Some organizational researchers have replaced individual creativity with organizational-innovation stages (e.g., Van de Ven et al., 1999). For others, creativity encompasses new knowledge, whereas innovation may not be creative and can be incremental (e.g., Bessant, 1998). We view creativity as material-discursive processes in creating *haute cuisine* where “how” replaces “who”. Creativity may result in radical breaks with the past (as in *Progressive Avant Garde* cuisine), or may incrementally modify it (as in *Contemporary Classical*). We explore how performative measures tangle with socio-material processes that relate to risk. Generally, new ideas and approaches engender risk as they disturb the status quo and power balances (Albrecht & Hall, 1991), thereby raising uncertainty and reducing predictability and control (George, 2007).

Performance for the chefs approximates performativity through incorporating economic, cultural, and social capitals reflected in commercial performance, artistic merit, and social impact. In Europe, the *Michelin Guide*, drawing on anonymous evaluations and inspections, constitutes the most respected ranking system for fine gastronomy and cuisine (Johnson et al., 2005). French cuisine predominates; yet, regardless of cuisine style, the evaluators award Michelin stars to restaurants on five criteria: product quality, mastering flavors and cooking, cuisine’s personality, value for money and consistency. One star constitutes “a very good restaurant in its category”, two stars reflect “excellent cooking, worth a detour”, while three stars display “exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey”. Maintenance of stars garners chefs’ psychic and emotional commitment. Losses of one star can cut sales by as much as 50 percent (Johnson et al., 2005) and consequently lead to restaurants’ closures. Therefore, high risks surround creative processes in this environment. For chefs, stars represent major achievements, recognition of their work, and important publicity, sometimes resulting in social innovations. We analyze how this success affects creativity as reflected in the language and stories surrounding chefs’ signature dishes and menus. We measure creativity as adherence to *Contemporary Classical*, *Inventive Eclectic* or *Progressive Avant Garde* cuisines in their menus and signature dishes. Cuisines and categorizations change and blend (Rao, Monin & Durand, 2005): We developed these categorizations through extensive interviews with chefs and industry experts. While chefs’ positions in material-discursive practices enable action, they also affect possibilities for future actions especially as they affect reputations: we labeled this behavior of meandering from established rules and approaches as risk taking.

Researchers have conducted little empirical research and developed no reliable instruments to understand how Michelin-star chefs create dishes for their restaurants. One of the authors has worked with several Michelin-star chefs and has a deep understanding of French cuisine. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 Michelin one, two and three-star chefs in Europe including Switzerland, France and the United Kingdom to better understand the underlying factors and dimensions that affect creative processes. As chefs had vague understandings of their restaurants’ performance, we also interviewed experts in this restaurant segment. We concluded that the appropriate methodology would involve qualitative data using semi-structured interviews and observation, which we supplemented with archival data on media coverage of the restaurants and chefs. Our measures include of performance (Michelin star ranking), social discourse (culinary rhetoric and cooking rules), materiality (ingredient combinations and technology) and process flow (chef’s role and involvement of external stakeholders). Figure 1 elaborates on the variables and processes in our research.

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Please Insert Figure 1 about here

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We propose:

P1: The higher the attained level of performance, the higher the level of incremental creativity and lower the level of radical creativity

P2: The lower the level of attained performance, the higher the level of radical creativity and lower the level of incremental creativity

P3: The higher the level of attained performance, the lower the level of risk taking

P4: The higher the level of attained performance, the greater the emphasis on brand building

Our contributions include a multi-level analysis of creativity (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian, 1999) spanning individual, organizational and social levels which we view as a holistic rather than linear process. We incorporate internal and external stakeholders and the role of time in chefs’ narratives (Boje, Haley & Saylors, 2016; Haley & Boje, 2014). We cast performance as performativity (the Michelin-star ratings) to include authoritative constructs and iterative norms against which the chefs and their stakeholders gauge creativity and risk taking.

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