



***Which Creativity to Take Seriously? Reflections
on the Creativity of People With Intellectual Disabilities
Którą twórczość traktować poważnie? Refleksje o twórczości
osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This paper aims to present the results of a study on the creativity of individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The research problem focuses on how selected individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities perceive creativity. The study employed the individual case method and used interviews to explore the participants' views on creativity.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The paper begins by clarifying key terminology related to creativity. It then outlines the research methodology, followed by the presentation and analysis of the collected data.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The data suggest that individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities perceive creativity similarly to those without intellectual disabilities. This is because the foundation of creative activity among the participants – like those without intellectual disabilities – rests on mechanisms such as understanding key concepts, motivation, and consideration of the opinions of their local environment.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: While this study cannot be used to generalize about creativity among people with intellectual disabilities, it offers an optimistic basis for future research involving a larger sample.

→ **KEYWORDS:** CREATIVITY, INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, SPECIAL EDUCATION, ABLEISM, ART

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia wyników badań dotyczących twórczości wybranych osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu umiarkowanym.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Problemem badawczym jest postrzeganie twórczości przez wybrane osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu umiarkowanym. Posłużono się metodą indywidualnych przypadków oraz wybrano technikę wywiadu, by zbadać sposób postrzegania twórczości przez wybrane dorosłe osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu umiarkowanym.

PROCES WYWODU: Artykuł rozpoczyna się od uściśleń terminologicznych dotyczących twórczości. Następnie przedstawiłem metodologię badań wraz z prezentacją i analizą zebranych danych badawczych.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Zebrane dane sugerują, że badane osoby postrzegają swoją twórczość podobnie jak osoby bez niepełnosprawności intelektualnej. Podstawą bowiem twórczej działalności badanych osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu umiarkowanym – podobnie jak osób bez niepełnosprawności intelektualnej – są mechanizmy rozumienia wybranych pojęć, motywacji i respektowania opinii środowiska lokalnego.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I IMPLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Opisane badanie nie może stanowić fundamentu generalizowania aspektu twórczości osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, jednak daje optymistyczne podstawy do badań dotyczących twórczości osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną na większej grupie respondentów.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: TWÓRCZOŚĆ, NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚĆ INTELEKTUALNA, PEDAGOGIKA SPECJALNA, ABLEIZM, SZTUKA**

Introduction

This article examines the notion of creativity as it pertains to selected individuals with intellectual disabilities. It aims to contest the hidden ableism that is often present in public spaces, particularly in societal perceptions of the creative contributions made by this population. Utilizing a case study methodology, this research investigates how individuals with intellectual disabilities experience creativity. The findings indicate that their engagement in creative processes is largely consistent with the experiences of individuals without intellectual disabilities.

Creativity in (Non)Creative Definitions

This article adopts Edward Nęcka's definition of creative work, which states: "The simplest way to define a creative product is as one characterized by the conjunction of two qualities: novelty and value" (2005, p. 13). Nęcka further explains that novelty and value should be considered in the context of the individual engaging in the creative process. A product deemed new and valuable by the creator may not necessarily be perceived as such by an observer, but this does not diminish its worth for the creator. As a result, a work validated by the creator's criteria must – according to this definition – be approved.

Margaret Boden provides additional insights into creativity, arguing that:

The most profound instances of creativity involve thinking about something that previously seemed unthinkable within the conceptual framework of the mind. An idea, once considered unattainable, can only emerge when the creator redefines or adjusts their prior style. This style may need refinement or even radical transformation making it possible to entertain ideas that were formerly unimaginable (2004, p. 6).

This new way of thinking about reality provides the foundation for asserting that the product of our creative efforts will be a unique work – a work that, in its essence, represents us – forming a structure in which we will find a part of ourselves (Mendecka, 2005, p. 28). During the act of creation, we draw from our emotional reserves, without which the work risks becoming inauthentic. It is this emotional dimension that serves as the glue without which creativity cannot be complete.

Nevertheless, creativity is not solely rooted in emotion; cognitive processes are equally essential. These mechanisms allow creative ideas to take shape in the mind before being transferred into the physical world. As Grażyna Mendecka notes, “Every properly functioning human mind is capable of creative activity, and in the creative process, ‘ordinary’ cognitive processes and mental operations are utilized in a unique way, distinct from routine cognition” (Mendecka, 2010, p. 7).

In Poland, two notable artists with intellectual disabilities are painter Nikifor Krynicki (Epifaniusz Drowniak), whose work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and the National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (Wolanin, 2022), and illustrator Paweł Garncorz, whose exhibitions have been featured at the Museum of the History of Katowice and the Silesian Museum (Skrzypczak-Szweda, 2023). Intellectual disability, as described in the ICD-11 classification, is defined as “as a group of etiologically diverse conditions originating during the developmental period characterized by significantly below average intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior” (World Health Organization, 2023). According to the World Health Organization, the minds of individuals with intellectual disabilities do not function at full capacity.

Given that creativity is often perceived as requiring an optimally functioning mind, it may seem implausible to consider the works of individuals with intellectual disabilities as genuinely creative – a conclusion that would be both unjust and overly narrow. Therefore, I suggest adopting a broader definition of human creative ability, where the functioning of the human mind – regardless of its level – is considered sufficient for the creative process to occur. This shift is important in the pursuit of full educational and social inclusion. As Marcin Wlazło asserts:

From the outset, the idea of inclusion has combined equalizing developmental and educational opportunities for all students with an emphasis on the importance of diversity. This diversity not only pertains to students’ needs but also the students themselves. In this sense, diversity relates to the identities of students, most of which are tied to individual characteristics that not only make them unique but are often the cause of unequal treatment, discrimination, marginalization, or exclusion (2023, pp. 47–48).

The above suggests that individuals with diverse developmental and educational needs (including those with intellectual disabilities) may face exclusion and marginalization due to their differences. In the context of creative activity, there is a legitimate concern that the creative work of individuals with intellectual disabilities may be overlooked or marginalized specifically because of their disability.

Educational and rehabilitative institutions in Poland are increasingly offering activities that incorporate art therapy, which I view as a promising step toward comprehensively recognizing and supporting the development of individuals with diverse needs. However, there are concerns about the presence of hidden ableism, which often manifests in these institutions through the marginalization of the creative work of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The result of such hidden ableism may include the “regular” belittling of their creative output, pointing out perceived imperfections or questioning that the public would appreciate their work. Often, individuals with intellectual disabilities do not have the opportunity to showcase their creations without assistance in promoting them.

I would also like to stress the significance of recognizing the distinction between what is truly creative and what is deemed creative only through the eyes of a therapist. The works of individuals with disabilities, like those of people without disabilities, may simply not be masterpieces. The fear of excluding or marginalizing an artist should not lead to the assumption that a work is remarkable solely because it was created by a person with a disability (Wojciechowski, 2013a, 2013b, 2015–2016). In conclusion, I want to underscore the need for critically reexamining the concept of creativity, suggesting that it be anchored in a process achievable by a functioning human mind. A more inclusive understanding of creative activity could help counter the persistence of hidden ableism, which, regrettably, remains present in educational and rehabilitative institutions in Poland.

Research Methodology

The research project discussed in this article focuses on the creativity of individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities. The purpose of the study was to explore how selected individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities perceive creativity. I identified the research problem by posing the following question: *How do individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities perceive creativity?* This main research question was further clarified through specific sub-questions:

- How do the participants understand concepts related to creativity?
- What motivates the participants to engage in creative activities?
- How do participants perceive the local community’s reception of their creative work?

To carry out the project, I employed a qualitative research method, specifically the case study approach. The research technique used was the interview, and the tool was a structured interview questionnaire (Pilch & Bauman, 2001).

The study was conducted in 2023 and involved two adults with moderate intellectual disabilities, both of whom have full legal capacity and are clients of a Day Care Center

in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. The county where the Day Care Center is located has a population of approximately 60,000. The Day Care Center was randomly chosen for the study, while the participants were selected through purposeful sampling.

The first participant is a 20-year-old male with moderate intellectual disability (referred to as Participant 1), and the second is a 34-year-old female with moderate intellectual disability (referred to as Participant 2). Both participants communicate verbally, and their speech is fully comprehensible to listeners. The interviews were conducted individually in a private room, without the presence of third parties.

Analysis of Research Results

In this section, I present the results of my research, grounded in the methodology outlined above. The collected data is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Transcript of Interview #1

1	What is art?	Art is, for example, what I do. Art is creating songs... I mean... it's creating... I don't really know how to define it.
2	What is artistic?	Artistic? Well, I could be artistic because I post new content on TikTok almost every day. And when I'm really focused, I can do it every hour.
3	What types of artistic activities do you know?	Um, music, drawing, technical stuff, mechanical, pottery with clay.
4	Which one do you do?	The first one and mechanical.
5	And what do you do in mechanical art?	Uh... Sometimes I have to tighten some screws.
6	What is creativity?	Creativity is when you create something, especially if you enjoy it – like making a statue out of clay or something. Or... I don't know, something related to facial expressions.
7	Are you a creator?	Kind of, since I do create some stuff.
8	How many videos do you have on TikTok?	About a hundred.
9	You create some stuff? It sounds like you create a lot.	I started about a week or two ago, around two Saturdays back. I noticed people were watching my videos, so I just kept making more.
10	Why do you create?	Out of boredom, for example. When people watch and like my stuff, it motivates me to keep going.
11	What do you create about?	For example...well... about friendship, or how I cheated fate when I had an accident.
12	What does creating give you?	Uh... Fans.
13	How do you create your lyrics and music?	I look for some beats and sing to them. If they're not good, I keep searching.
14	Do you do everything on your phone or computer?	On my phone.
15	And you record on your phone too?	Yep.

16	How do your friends react to your work?	Well, they used to have a bad opinion of me. But I don't really care what they think. If they think poorly of me, I just don't care about their feelings.
17	How does your family react to your work?	Pretty well.
18	What about your fans?	When I met some friends at my grandma's, they asked when I'd be posting my next video. That motivated me, you know. If they want it, I'll release it.
19	Do you think other people should try creating?	Yeah, they should try. If it doesn't work out, then it doesn't work out.

Own source.

Table 2. Transcript of Interview #2

1	I heard you're an artist?	I like to sing. I even sang at a ten-year anniversary recently. I just can't stop lately.
2	Do you know what art is?	Art? Art can be found in acting... or books.
3	And your favorite art is music, right?	Not only – I used to attend a theater club. We performed with my group at school. I even played Mrs. Dobrójska once. I still remember the lines – sometimes I hear them in my head.
4	What is artistic activity? What does it make you think of?	Organizing something related to art.
5	Do you participate in any music activities here at the Center?	We have classes with Karolina, ¹ – she sings and plays her ukulele. I recently sang at the Dignity Day event while she played a song from the <i>Męskie Granie</i> festival.
6	What about at home?	At home, I just sing by myself. I love songs from cartoons – they're my biggest weakness. My favorites are from <i>Pocahontas</i> and <i>The Little Mermaid</i> . Yes, <i>Colors of the Wind</i> and <i>Part of Your World</i> – they're such powerful songs and I love how they let me really show off my voice.
7	Why do you sing?	Because I like it.
8	Does singing give you anything else?	Joy. And sometimes I can show that I can have moods too. Like if I wanted to sing Chylińska's song, like I'm having a bad day, but it's not really true – just for fun.
9	When you sing at home, do you sing for yourself, or do others hear you?	Sometimes they hear me – mostly my mom from the other room. I once even officially sang for her. I recorded a birthday music video for her with Luiza's help. I sang <i>Letter to Mom</i> , and we made a music video.
10	What is creativity?	It's when we create something.
11	Are you a creator?	I don't think so. But I can dream about creating something original in my mind.

¹ For the purposes of this article, the names of the Center's employees have been changed.

12	You mentioned making the video for your mom – isn't that creativity?	It was a one-time thing, but maybe – it moved me to tears when I watched it. I didn't expect it to turn out so well. When my mom watched it, she didn't say anything, just went quietly to her room (feels emotional). I even showed it to the girls – I was shaking. I felt really strong emotions. Like standing on stage – you sing, and suddenly you feel your legs trembling, you feel hot, but in the end, you're happy.
13	Let me ask again – are you a creator?	Maybe I am, after all (smiles).
14	Do you do anything else that could show you're a creator, maybe here at the Center?	Hmm... maybe... We sometimes make things out of clay in the upstairs workshop with Marta.
15	And do you think that's creativity?	It is. Or out of felt in the next room with. Kasia – we're all creators... they help us try to make something ourselves. There's some satisfaction in it.
16	How do your friends react to your creativity?	That depends – I'd have to tell you more off the record.
17	You don't have to share if you don't want to – no problem.	Some of them like it.
18	How does your family react to your creativity?	Positively. My mom started crying once.
19	When she watched that music video?	No, it was something else. I once sang the song <i>Easily Burnt</i> . I was going to Szczecin for a performance. She cried, and I didn't expect her to.
20	How did you react to that?	I took it as a compliment. She started hugging me, saying she wouldn't let go of me. She calls me her little singer – probably because I'm short (laughs).
21	Why did you decide to become a creator?	I wanted to see what it's like – to experience it myself.
22	What motivates you to keep doing it?	There are people who motivate me. And positive thoughts.
23	Do you think everyone should try creating?	Yes.
24	Why?	To stop feeling sad – it brings joy. And to focus on something positive.

Own source.

How Respondents Understand Concepts Related to Creativity

Creativity is commonly defined as “the act of creating something, especially works of art” (SJP [Polish Language Dictionary], n.d.c). When asked to explain this term, the respondents provided answers that were largely in line with the official definition. Their responses suggest that the participants' understanding of creativity is generally consistent with the formal explanation found in the relevant literature. In the *Polish Language Dictionary*, the term *art* is described as “a field of artistic activity distinguished by its aesthetic values; also: the products of such activity” (SJP [Polish Language Dictionary], n.d.b).

While respondents were unable to articulate a general definition of art, they referred to specific activities that are components of the officially accepted definition.

The final question concerning creativity was designed to elicit the respondents' understanding of artistic activity and artistry. The word artistic is defined as "related to art or an artist; possessing artistic qualities" (SJP [Polish Language Dictionary], n.d.a). Respondent 1 described himself as artistic, which I take to be a sign of high self-esteem and satisfaction with his creative work. Respondent 2 associated artistic activity with organizing art-related events, which I believe closely reflects the official definition of the term. Based on these findings, I conclude that the participants in this study understand concepts related to creativity in a manner that closely mirrors the formal definitions.

What Motivates the Respondents to Engage in Creative Activities?

The starting point for further analysis is the respondents' perceptions of their own creativity. Respondent 1 confidently affirmed this belief, citing the presence of a creative process in his life as sufficient evidence of being a creator. In contrast, Respondent 2 did not initially express such certainty. However, after reflecting on and recalling her own creative works, she shifted her view and began to see herself as a creative person, with noticeable satisfaction in this realization.

Individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities may need support in daily situations to bolster their self-esteem. In my view, conscious engagement with different forms of art can contribute to this process. Creating work that is product-oriented requires proper motivation. The widely accepted principle of autonomous creativity states: "People are more creative when they feel intrinsically motivated – by interest, enjoyment, and challenges in the work itself, rather than by external pressures or rewards" (Szmidski, 2005, p. 117). Motivation can be divided into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Alicja Gałązka differentiates between the two by stating:

Intrinsic motivation is an autotelic activity, pursued and continued primarily for its own sake, for the action itself, rather than for its consequences. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is driven by the external outcomes of the activity (recognition, money, etc.)" (Gałązka, 2002, p. 16).

For Respondent 1, the motivation to engage in creative activities comes primarily from external factors – specifically, the opinions of others. This feedback is often measured through "likes," with a higher count indicating greater public interest in the creator's work. Respondent 1 independently creates music using software on his mobile phone and shares it on a popular online platform. Marek Krajewski and Filip Schmidt note that "the artist's role is validated through non-institutional recognition, a sense of being needed, or simply by observing responses to their work" (Krajewski & Schmidt, 2017, p. 92). Respondent 1's perspective aligns closely with this observation.

Respondent 2, on the other hand, derives motivation for creative activities primarily from internal factors, particularly the emotions that accompany these actions. Joy, satisfaction, self-worth, and happiness are the driving forces behind her engagement in creative work. Additionally, Respondent 2 is also motivated by external factors, particularly the recognition of their work by other people – those close to her. This recognition mirrors what Krajewski and Schmidt describe as the artist's need for validation through the approval of their community (Krajewski & Schmidt, 2017). In conclusion, the second research question has been answered. Individuals with intellectual disabilities utilize similar motivational mechanisms as those typically observed in individuals without intellectual disabilities – both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influence their creative endeavors.

How is the Creative Work of the Respondents Perceived by Their Local Community?

The final aspect examined in this study is the perception of the respondents' creative work by their local community, according to their own opinions. As previously mentioned, this perception plays a significant role in motivating creative individuals. I would like to emphasize the importance of the local community's acceptance of a creative potential as a critical factor in human development (Skibska, 2012). Respondent 1 reported that the local community generally responded indifferently to his creative work, though he personally felt unaffected by this lack of interest. Respondent 2 expressed similar skepticism about the community's reaction but chose not to elaborate further on the matter.

When asked about their family's reactions to their creative endeavors, both respondents described them as positive. Respondent 2, in particular, noted that her family's encouragement is highly significant and serves as a major source of motivation. The respondents' experiences suggest that the local community's reception of their creative work is mixed. While peer responses were not always positive, both respondents received supportive feedback from their families, which I believe plays a vital role in nurturing their creative potential (Mendecka, 2008).

The study data suggest that the local community's reactions to the creative work of individuals with intellectual disabilities, as perceived by the respondents, are similar to the responses received by individuals without intellectual disabilities. Creative individuals, regardless of ability, must account for differences in their audience's aesthetic preferences, which can lead to varying reactions to their work. In conclusion, the main research question has been addressed through several detailed sub-questions: the respondents' understanding of concepts related to creativity, their motivation for engaging in creative activities, and their perception of how their work is received by the local community. The findings suggest that the way individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities perceive creativity is largely similar to that of individuals without intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion

The research data presented in this article were gathered from only two respondents, which inevitably limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized. However, these insights may still provide valuable observations that merit further investigation with a larger participant pool. The analysis highlights the potential to address hidden ableism within educational and rehabilitative institutions. This implicit form of discrimination often influences how the creative work of individuals with intellectual disabilities is perceived, contributing to their exclusion from being recognized as “authentic” creators solely due to their intellectual disabilities. The purpose of this text is not to argue that individuals with intellectual disabilities should automatically be labeled as “creative” based on specific traits. Instead, it seeks to encourage critical reflection on the potential presence of hidden ableism in educational and rehabilitation settings. Acknowledging this bias is an essential step toward addressing and ultimately eliminating it.

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Source of funding

Lack of funding sources.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).