

The intrinsic diversity of creativity research: Interview with Prof. Todd Lubart

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Professor Todd Lubart's past and present work on creativity is a perfect example of how dynamic and multi-faceted this area of psychology really is. Creative phenomena draw on cognitive, personality, emotional, motivational and social processes at once and creativity studies can be found at the intersection between different psychological fields: cognitive, social and personality, organisational, developmental, educational, individual differences and so on. In this interview Professor Lubart discusses his creativity research projects and how they evolved in a constant dialogue between personal interests and opportunities for research and collaboration. Creativity is portrayed as a heterogeneous domain where the most interesting breakthroughs happen 'at the borders'. Here, those who make an impact are the ones ready to take risks and exploit the domain's intrinsic diversity and the possibilities for creative thinking associated with it.

Todd Lubart is Professor at the University Paris Descartes where he directs the activity of the Laboratoire Adaptations Travail Individu (LATI). He earned his PhD from Yale University in 1994 under the supervision of Robert Sternberg and soon after that moved to the University of Paris Descartes where he became an Assistant Professor in 1995 and then Professor of Psychology in 2002. He was a member of the Institut Universitaire de France (2005-2010). His work on creativity is extensive and includes approximately 75 publications, articles, books and book chapters covering various aspects of the phenomenon: creative process, individual differences, role of cognition and emotion, environmental and cultural factors, etc. Among his co-authored books, "Defying the crowd: Cultivating creativity in a culture of conformity" (1995, with R. Sternberg), "Psychologie de la créativité" (2003) and the co-edited volume "Models of intelligence: International perspectives" (2003, with R. Sternberg and J. Lautrey). Professor Lubart was responsible for several research grants on creativity and co-organised several conferences or symposiums dedicated to this topic. His current work develops a multivariate approach to creativity.

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EJOP: Thank you for accepting our invitation for an interview. Your work for many years had focused on the topic of creativity and individual differences, could you tell me how did you come to work in this particular area?

Todd Lubart: I started by studying various topics in psychology actually, first psycholinguistics and then deductive logical reasoning and inductive reasoning, and then I started to look for a kind of problem solving topic to study more in-depth for my Masters degree or PhD, and had the opportunity to find creativity among the subjects offered. And this particular topic was kind of on my line of evolving interests, but I was also fascinated by it because I initially studied visual art as my first discipline before I got involved in psychology. And so during about seven years I had done studies in visual arts and considered going to an art school before I decided differently. But then creativity made me go back to some of my previous interests since some of the things I was studying involved people making drawings and other similar products. And in fact, when I actually started psychology, I was more oriented towards a generalist approach, not an individual differences one in particular. But when I got involved in that reasoning study, on inductive and deductive reasoning, I was in fact looking at people who deviated from the general logical reasoning model. And I got interested in what they were thinking and in the individual differences associated with this. However in the end, when the moment came for me to choose a Masters and PhD topic my decision also had to do with the chance of having creativity research proposed by the university.

EJOP: So this kind of converged with your many interests, including your work in visual arts and then reasoning. But did you know from before about creativity or the idea just came then and there?

Todd Lubart: Well I can say that I wasn't specifically thinking about creativity until I looked at the list of topics proposed that included many choices, different professors to work with. And at that moment I thought that creativity seemed to me to be the most interesting. There were other choices that were not of zero interest but this was the most appealing. And then, when I came to work on it I saw it is even more fascinating because I am not a purely cognitive-oriented person, so I was interested in some social aspects, etc., and in creativity in fact you kind of have a mix of cognitive and other types of factors, like emotional, social, motivational and so on.

So that was a good choice for me because it gave me the chance to move around within the same topic.

EJOP: You said you also have a background in visual arts. Do you think this influences the way you came to think about creativity? Is it important for you and your work that you know both 'sides' of creativity, as practice and as a research topic?

Todd Lubart: I don't know, it's hard to say, I don't know what could have been, what would have been if things were different. I also don't think that I am consciously considering my visual arts training when I am studying creativity but I would say that the basic point of departure for my work on creativity was the artistic process. So it was probably not a random choice. And I was mostly into activities such as drawing and painting and that was where I've put more effort. And I was in touch with some students in art and art graduates or professors who were judging the products, I was also in some art workshops at the university where the participants were these more advanced art students and just after that I extended my interests to literature, to writing as forms of creativity, and then to other things. Notably now I am quite interested in design, which is a bit connected to the artistic stuff. So art definitely is a connecting point but I do not sit and think about my previous personal experience.

EJOP: I understand. You approached a lot of aspects of creativity in your work, as you mentioned already: from the cognitive to the social, from organisational to developmental and educational, the study of giftedness and so on. And now you were talking a bit about a kind of 'art nucleus'. What would you say are the red threads going through your work? Do you think in terms of an overarching project or do you have all these different projects and are keeping them a bit separated?

Todd Lubart: I had shifting interests: so at one point I was interested more in cognitive factors and studying them, at another I was in a more detailed personality traits phase, one moment I was in a more social environment phase; but ultimately now I had an opportunity to think about this because here in France we do a thing called 'habilitation' so it's a moment when people are encouraged to put all their work together and make a master plan. So I was able to kind of put it together around the multivariate, multi-faceted approach to creativity in the sense that I was all this time exploring the different facets of the phenomenon. And I kind of had for each facet a timeline, a kind of curve of my activity on each of them. And there were opportunities that presented themselves that made me be more interested in one facet compared to another, when some collaborators were available. And so the whole picture is diverse, leading me to move in and out of interest for particular facets, each with its timeline of activity. And currently I am preoccupied a little bit

more with trying to connect the factors or facets with the creative process, in adults in different domains. And this work has an aspect of identifying dimensions and ways of training what can be trained to enhance creativity in different domains. It is based on identifying the profile of factors at play for one type of creativity or another. And with children we have a project of assessing creative potential again in different domains. We have developed a new battery of creativity measures for children, called EPoC (Evaluation of Potential for Creativity). So I am kind of in a phase that is very much assessment related.

EJOP: And with educational applicability.

Todd Lubart: Yes, educational applicability or educational implications. For children and adults depending on the profile of the person and comparing it with the kind of profile that is ideal for creative expression in their domain. So this is the stage I am at.

EJOP: Well it has been a kind of organic growth of your interests I see. But at the same time you now have this particular focus. You also reviewed several creativity models in your work and you are obviously preoccupied with 'modelling' creativity, taking into account domain specificity. It is interesting that you mentioned the children and adults focus. Talking about continuities in creative expression, do you see creativity in childhood and adulthood as two completely different things or are you concerned with the links between them?

Todd Lubart: Oh they are not two different things. They are linked, connected, and the basic model is the same, but the manifestation is a little different because in adults it gets more domain and expertise-linked. And in children there is a domain specificity that can be detected from quite early on but the domains are broader, and so not as detailed and specific as in the case of adults. But ultimately I have the same ideas about the factors involved, the process, etc.

EJOP: So the 'content' elements are different, the 'input' and 'output' as it were.

Todd Lubart: Yes, that's it. The nature of what is 'entering' for example from the environment and so on, and what is 'coming out', the kind of production they make, and also the way that others are reacting to the work is different for children and adults, but it is globally the same basic idea.

EJOP: And in terms of research, what are the methods you usually employ to study creativity? Especially now that you said you are in an assessment phase.

Todd Lubart: Well mostly we ask people, children and adults, to produce works and when they produce the works we try to measure or observe certain things in the process. And then we get a final production, which we submit to a panel of judges, using consensual assessment, and we relate the outcome of their evaluation to other individual differences variables that we measure off-line, which concern personality or cognition. This is the basic technique. But I should say that my individual differences approach became even more focused when I came over to Paris, because at that moment I joined a research group which was 100% working on individual differences, with more elaborate models of how these differences are constructed and evolve and so on. So through these contacts with people around me I've got more and more focused on this aspect.

EJOP: At the same time you have edited many book chapters on creativity and culture along the years. And it is interesting to notice how they sit together: on the one hand individual differences and on the other cultural differences, the micro and the macro level.

Todd Lubart: Well individuals obviously reflect a lot from their cultural environment. It's true that the culture work is more at a macro level and I don't exclusively work at an individual level. In fact I initially started working on the topic of creativity and culture when I was interested in the social environment, I was in a 'less individual' phase, and at that time it was very little written on that topic. It became quite popular afterwards and so I would have probably left it at some point, after an initial entry, but then I had continuous solicitation for this, it was a like a snowball effect. So I kept coming back to it, trying to get a little further on it. And then obviously when I came over here in France I was myself experiencing a new culture and was also getting more in contact with various people in Europe and other places too that put me into the kind of situation that brings this cultural aspect back in, back to my mind.

EJOP: It is interesting how you said you picked some ideas up and then left them at some point, at least for a while; it reminds me of the investment theory of creativity you proposed with Robert Sternberg. Actually I was curious to know if you still work on that idea or have integrated it somehow in your current research. I know that the seeds of the multivariate approach were present in there.

Todd Lubart: Yes in that model there is the multivariate approach which I obviously continue to use for structuring my thinking about creativity. Then there was also the more specific investment concept and that is something in fact I am reflecting on at the moment: the connection between investment, economic thinking and the creative person as a decision-maker, choosing where to go next. There were a few

times when I worked on this occasionally, so I did keep it alive and sporadically there were requests to give an update on it. And chance has it that I might go back to that idea since I am currently involved in a teaching situation where economics and psychology are brought together, in a Masters programme. So it just so happens that in creativity there is always this possibility of working on different areas at the same time. And so it works out...

EJOP: To continue 'investing' in the investment model.

Todd Lubart: Yes, yes, right, because now I am suddenly in contact with a lot of economists and so there might be some new things to work on there.

EJOP: So I understand that your professional trajectory had to do with an interaction between your interests and the opportunities you encountered: of teaching, of writing, of researching and so on. After working so much on creativity, what do you find to be the most interesting parts of this work, and also the most challenging parts? What do you like best?

Todd Lubart: Oh, well, I like best working on developing some theoretical ideas and trying to think of how we can design an empirical study that could test these ideas. And I also like the data analysis phase because it is actually a rather inventive or exploratory phase, usually. So I like these phases of research. And then creativity is a topic that, compared to other topics of psychology, is not that much studied. But there is a growing number of studies, kind of an exponential growth of creativity studies. And in any case, within the field of creativity I was always interested in those topics that were the most ambiguous. I don't know for what reason but perhaps because they give the most leeway, the most room for moving around, trying whatever you like to try, compared to those topics where, after a certain time and number of studies, you get into a mode of detailed testing and finding that last brick that is missing from the nice wall that was built. But that is not my cup of tea.

EJOP: In creativity studies there are bricks everywhere, but no final wall.

Todd Lubart: Yes, right. I would say that in the scientific method there is an aspect that is quite technical and rational and detail-oriented but there are also phases and topics where things are a little more 'artistic'. And even in analysis, people say for example that exploratory factor analysis is a little bit of an artistic tool, compared to other techniques where everyone will get to the exact same result. In factor analysis it is not completely sure that with the same dataset everyone gets the same result. It's a more exploratory, a little bit 'artistic', treatment of the data. And those

were always the kind of topics that I was attracted to. Luckily I also have a lot of interesting collaborators and so when something gets to 'sticky' or difficult than I call up on somebody who I might have met, who might have ideas. I am not really much of a lone worker.

EJOP: In the end, do you have any words of advice for young scholars or students working on creativity? Any concluding thoughts?

Todd Lubart: Well I think that for any topic, but I suppose you can apply this to creativity, that you obviously want to know what has been done but you don't want to get too stuck in the current thinking. And that is true for any search for a creative idea; one could apply it or should apply it even more to thinking about creativity. So the idea would be to take the risk to go in a new direction, counter the current thinking, and try out new things. Because in the worst case you wasted your time or finally don't get a result that was worthy to see the light of day but...

EJOP: The voyage was worth making.

Todd Lubart: Yes. Exactly.

EJOP: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us.