

Self-Designed Research Paper

The Addiction of a Creative Madman

“Upheaval [is] beyond the will; the discipline to shape it [is] not. Imagination [is] somewhere in between.” - Kay Redfield Jamison

As human beings, we are all drawn to discovering the unknown. We live to answer the questions that keep us up at night- questions that may have seemed impossible to answer at one point or another. Specifically, we are intrigued by what our minds can do and, even more specifically, why our minds do these things. As science and technology continue to evolve, answers revolving around this concept continue to surface, offering more understanding and further questions to rise. With these findings, it is evident that humans will one day be able to break down the mind as simple as it is to break down a puzzle. In doing so, we will be able to tackle the mental illnesses that arise in a majority of the population, understanding what causes these illnesses to occur and, most importantly, how we can cope with these illnesses further than simply taking medication. With this information, psychologists and neurologists may be able to end the debate revolving around the cliché of the “mad artist”- this concept that artists are only creative simply because they are mad. The most popular question posed regarding this debate seems to be whether or not mental illness causes creativity and though the topic has been studied and experimented upon numerous times over more than a thousand years, the answer has still yet to be discovered (Sussman).

With evidence supporting both sides to the claim, it is still difficult in this day and age to determine if this myth is indeed a fact and yet, scientists continue to debate the issue, even

though “it isn’t very easy to define or measure creativity” (Hammond). Where this concept can be rather appealing, especially because of all the “mad” artists throughout history (Vincent van Gogh, T.S. Elliot, Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Darwin, etc.), the information gathered could be used more beneficially; the research revolving around the connection between creativity and mental illness should focus more on how being creative helps to keep those with mental illnesses sane enough to function without medication and how being mad only pushes artists to continue their work, instead of allowing them to be more creative.

It cannot be denied that there is a link between creativity and madness, yet the evidence that has been obtained varies greatly in results, showing that the connection has yet to be defined. Terms, madness is often used to describe mental illnesses such as mania, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder, all of which characterize mood disorders. In “Creativity and Mood Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis”, Christa L. Taylor analyzes studies that “[support] a link between creativity and psychopathology”, claiming that the evidence is limited. “Seminal studies conducted in the mid-to-late 20th century using psychiatric and historiometric methods have been heavily criticized for bias.” This is mostly because creativity is quite difficult to define, as well as to measure. Studies have measured this concept using various methods, including looking at the level of creativity (where one stands in the creative field), using “interactive elements proposed to influence creativity”, and comparing individuals who are in career fields about creativity to those who aren’t (Taylor). Not only is it difficult to determine what causes this link, but these studies are also unreliable in the sense that “they often fail to use matched controls or match controls on basic demographic characteristics, failing to account for variables that covary with creativity or creative achievement” (Taylor).

Knowing that there is a distinct link between creativity and mental illness causes psychologists to pursue the reasoning behind this instead of focusing on how the current information can be deemed useful. Adrienne Sussman discusses the importance of an artist's madness in "Mental Illness and Creativity: A Neurological View of the Tortured Artist." She addresses the "similarities between mental illnesses like manic depression and schizophrenia and the creative mind":

The biological support invokes the frontal lobe of the brain- the main connection between the temporal and parietal lobes, where knowledge and concepts are stored. Unusual activity in the frontal lobe, and in particular the prefrontal cortex, is characteristic of both schizophrenia and manic depression. Hyperactivity in this region may cause a person to draw unusual connections between seemingly unrelated items or ideas, resulting in the delusions of paranoid schizophrenic or mania.

Sussman uses this concept to further show the link between creativity and mental illness. Furthermore, Sussman expresses how those with schizophrenia and mania develop their ideas and can express them, despite the common lack of motivation that often comes with mental illness. Because manics and schizophrenics often find themselves discluded from societal norms, they can use this disclusion to their advantage, grabbing at their delusions, intensified dreams, and "disturbances in thought, language, emotions, and activity," to produce their art- whether it be poetry or paintings (Sussman).

In "A Fine Madness", Jamison discusses how most famous authors have experienced manic breakdowns, depression, addiction, alcoholism, etc. He mentions how mania helps to enhance memory and originality, pointing out that mania helps to "make the taking of risks and exploration more likely and creative combination of ideas more probable." It is the mood swings

that come with mood disorders that allow these artists to find their motivation to create their work, breaking through their “writer’s block”. Jamison uses the example of Robert Lowell, an infamous poet from the 1940s, who had previously expressed that he “used slivers of his delusional experience for poetry,” finding peace within his mind only after he had finished writing.

Like Robert Lowell, many writers, artists, and musicians with high rates of mania have claimed that their “intense moods were essential to their creative work” (Jamison). In “This is Your Brain on Creativity”, Jeffery Kluger discusses a study conducted by neurologists Mark Beeman and John Kounios, who were able to study how creativity affects the brain. From this study, they were able to “[learn] how to trace the creative insight back to its source, understand what sparked it, and figure out why that spark happens more often in some than others.” Using functional magnetic resonance imaging and high-density electroencephalography, these two neurologists discovered that creative insights and bursts of creative ideas “help to mediate the neurology of the reward experience,” meaning that sudden bursts of creativity help to calm the brain and allow for a feeling of empowerment, a feeling that artists with mood disorders strive to feel to continue creating art. This burst, originating from the delusions, intensified dreams, daydreaming, and problem-solving that “mad artists” experience due to their disorders, is what allows them to continue their work and continue to feel sanity. It is as Charles Darwin once wrote, “My chief enjoyment and sole employment throughout life have been scientific work, and the excitement from such work makes me for the time forget, or drives quite away my daily discomfort.”

In David Berreby’s article “Are Neurotics More Creative”, Berreby further addresses the link between creativity and mental illness, offering opposing sides to the question. Where the

popular opinion seems to be that “neurosis causes people to stay away from creative things,” it is argued that it is the neurosis that pushes creativity:

Neurotics don’t need to be freed from their misery to be creative; on the contrary, they should embrace it. Far from killing creativity, neuroticism feeds it.

It isn’t that neurosis, or “being mad”, gives a person creativity or even causes them to be more creative; it simply allows them more access to psychological aspects that can be used towards their art, whether it be painting, writing, or even dealing with scientific discoveries. Being able to access these new ideas and perspectives allows for these “mad artists” to cope and find value within their madness.

As the debate on what the link is between creativity and mental illness continues, more debates have arisen revolving around the idea that these “mad artists” should be left at piece-- that they should not be forced to take medication. Sussman sees mental illness as an advantage, “allowing the artist access to brain connections and visions that others cannot imagine.”

Hammond reported that “some individuals find their illness does seem to enhance their creativity and are even deterred from taking medication, for example, for the fear that that creativity may be extinguished.” Edvard Munch, a famous painter, expressed the same concern: “[My troubles] are part of me and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and [treatment] would destroy my art. I want to keep those sufferings.” Where Munch may be valid in his thought about treatment, it isn’t that the treatment (medication) would take away his illness and thus his creativity, but rather just take away his creativity. Medication prescribed to those with mental illnesses has been known to dull senses and halt the need for that burst of creative ideas that “help to mediate the neurology of the reward experience” (Kluger).

It has failed to realize that the link between creativity and mental illness is not that mental illness enhances creativity. Creativity, instead, allows for the relief of mental illness. It allows for the “altering [of] images in particular ways, [it] can have a more powerful impact on the visual and limbic brain areas than reality- causing emotional resonance, a sense of meaning and beauty that the real world rarely produced”, all of which an artist is searching for (Sussman). Creating and constructing things from ideas that spawn from low points in a “mad artist’s” life is what causes the relief that he seeks. It isn’t that one has to suffer from mental illness to be creative, but if one is suffering, creativity can become a medication itself, offering not only the purest form of treatment but also a way to express what a mental disorder does to the brain in ways that others may understand. As Julia Cameron stated, quoted in Berreby’s article, “When people begin living in their creativity, the neurosis disappears.”

Works Cited

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