The “Mad Genius” Controversy: The Debate Rages On

A review of

The Insanity Hoax: Exposing the Myth of the Mad Genius

by Judith Schlesinger


Reviewed by

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The mad genius controversy—the idea that mental illness and creativity are linked—has been raging for decades among psychologists and “for more than two thousand years” (p. 57) if one includes philosophers and other thinkers dating back to Aristotle, Plato, and the ancient Greeks. In her latest book, Judith Schlesinger argues that the reason the debate endures has more to do with the general public falling in love with the romantic concept of a mad genius than with a careful examination of empirical data on the topic.

The Insanity Hoax: Exposing the Myth of the Mad Genius, as the author acknowledges, although “grounded in decades of careful scholarship [is] not a scientific tome” (p. 12). The breezy, conversational tone makes the book easy and, at times, funny to read, though readers should be prepared for a book that emphasizes its points with frequent onomatopoetic expressions such as the word THWACK! in uppercase letters (e.g., p. 71).
Because it appears that the author aims for a range of audiences, from creative people to the general public, as well as psychologists, it is perhaps not surprising that some information already familiar to psychologists is presented. For instance, one entire chapter of the book is devoted to defining the term *creativity*, with note made of common psychological definitions of the concept that include dimensions of originality and social utility. Another chapter early on in the book is spent defining *madness* and related terms. Readers who wish for a more succinct, focused account of the author’s view on the mad genius hypothesis are advised first to read her recent article in the American Psychological Association journal *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (Schlesinger, 2009).

Schlesinger brings an interesting background to the heated debate in her present book on the mad genius controversy. In addition to her psychology PhD, she has over 20 years of experience as a psychotherapist, and she has been a college professor, a published jazz critic, and a member of the National Association of Science Writers.

At the core of Schlesinger’s argument are her critiques of oft-cited scholarship on the mad genius controversy. The author focuses on a number of the key studies by psychiatrists and psychologists that have been published over the past 20 years or so. In particular, Schlesinger critiques Nancy Andreasen (1987), Kay Redfield Jamison (1989, 1993), and Arnold Ludwig (1995), while praising scholars such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Albert Rothenberg (1990).

Schlesinger’s arguments concerning attempts to assess the creativity of the deceased should be tempered, as the scholars who use such techniques (e.g., Ludwig, 1995) have acknowledged the challenges associated with this method while also noting its advantages. For example, despite including more than 50 pages of methods and statistics in his book, Ludwig (1995) even offered to make a hard copy available of the bibliographic references used in his analyses that were not printed in his text “due to space and fiscal considerations” (p. 200). Schlesinger indicates that Ludwig’s use of biographies is “problematic from the gate because all the evidence turns on the personal agendas of these biographers” and “many writers are likely to emphasize, and even exaggerate, the struggles and afflictions of the people they write about” (Schlesinger, 2009, p. 68).

Schlesinger wants to have her cake and eat it, too. She criticizes research methods such as self-report/interview data and psychological autopsies/biographical work when it suits her, as in her critiques of Ludwig (1995), Andreasen (1987), and Jamison (1989, 1993), but when she cites research based on these same techniques to support her views, such as work by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Rothenberg (1990), she uncritically accepts these research methods.

Schlesinger frequently cites Rothenberg (1990), claiming that this work supports her view that the connection between creativity and mental illness is nonexistent. However, although she spares little criticism for scholars whose work comes to a conclusion different from her own, she does not critique Rothenberg in detail. She writes that for his “authoritative research,” “rather than making athletic inferential leaps from centuries of
gossip, they gathered firsthand data from people they could speak to without a Ouija board” (p. 25). Schlesinger reports that after 25 years of research, Rothenberg found only that the “motivation to create . . . reliably distinguished the creative person. Not a mood disorder in sight” (p. 99).

The reality is that of the 13 chapters in Rothenberg’s (1990) book, three may be considered psychological autopsies—the chapters on Emily Dickinson, Eugene O’Neill, and August Strindberg—and a fourth examined the connection of male homosexuality (back to the ancient Greeks) to creativity, finding that homosexuality is “only one of many conflict-ridden conditions responsible” for the “motive to create, . . . though it provides a slight edge over other conditions in that it is close to basic narcissism or self-love” (Rothenberg, p. 109). Although Schlesinger seems to accurately describe Rothenberg’s conclusions—on the final page of his text (p. 180), Rothenberg wrote that “emotional and mental illness is a decided hindrance to creativity”—the fact that she does not detail or critique his methods seems unfair, in light of her comments on other scholars.

Schlesinger’s tone seems to suggest some sort of grand conspiracy among Ludwig, Andreasen, Jamison, and the popular media to promote the mad genius hypothesis. In contrast, it seems more sensible and likely to presume that these three scholars aim to understand possible connections, evaluate hypotheses, and gain insight into the nature of creativity. I could find nowhere in Ludwig (1995), Jamison (1993), or Andreasen (1987) statements that claim mental illness to be a prerequisite for creativity. Indeed, the books by Ludwig and Jamison especially seem to emphasize the complexity of mental illness, creativity, and the relationship between the two.

Schlesinger has strong feelings on her topic, and her critiques of Jamison are especially harsh. Not only does Schlesinger believe that the purported link between mental illness and creativity is a nonexistent one, but she also says that the link devalues creative people. As she notes, “I detest the patronizing caricature of the mad creative and how it devalues the artistic product” (p. 11). Her argument that Jamison’s own bipolar disorder may have led her to biased and/or less valid conclusions is bound to be controversial.

Oddly, Schlesinger does not consider the obvious detailed counterargument to her claims: that is, perhaps Jamison’s conclusions and insights may be sharpened, not diminished, not only by her training but also by her status as an insider with respect to this condition. Perhaps Jamison has an especially apt clinical eye for spotting the condition? Another counterargument that Schlesinger does not fully explore is the idea that rather than devaluing creators and creative products, the fact that a number of creative persons with mental illness have produced incredible products has no relation (or a positive relation, in the sense of pride and esteem) to the value of these persons’ or products’ worth.

Schlesinger seems especially upset about research into the genetics of bipolar disorder (pp. 112–117). The author cites Jamison referring to “indisputable scientific evidence that it’s genetic and runs in families” (p. 114). But Schlesinger argues that “the responsible genes have not been isolated,” that “there’s a dizzying proliferation of alphabet candidates like
CACNA1C,” that “bipolar disorder may not be caused by the same gene(s) in all individuals” (p. 114), and that “poverty also runs in families, but that doesn’t make it genetic” (p. 115).

It seems that Schlesinger is confusing the ongoing quest for a more precise understanding of the genetic and biological mechanisms of bipolar disorder for a lack of an evidence base for a genetic component of the disorder. In fact, if Schlesinger were to refer to an introductory psychology textbook such as a recent edition of the Weiten text she referred to in her 2009 article, she would find a section discussing results from twin studies of genetic factors involved in mood disorders, with concordance rates averaging about 65 percent for identical twins and just 14 percent for fraternal twins, with evidence for a stronger influence of genetic factors for bipolar than for unipolar disorders (Weiten, 2010, p. 594).

Schlesinger is certainly correct that researchers using historiometric and biographical approaches face many research challenges. For instance, it is true that many biographers approach their topics more as hagiographers venerating the saints they write about and neglecting troubling, painful, or morally reprehensible facts regarding their subjects. However, when a scholar such as Ludwig reviews more than 1,000 biographies over 10 years, most by different authors, one suspects that the analysis, although far from perfect, has something valuable to offer.

Schlesinger fails to note or emphasize that the same researchers she attacks are keenly aware of the challenges that their paradigm presents. Thus it hardly seems fair when she writes, in a critique of Dean Keith Simonton’s work and the historiometry approach (pp. 125–128), that biographical “facts are only frozen bits of narrative, making historiometry as vulnerable to conjecture and personal agenda as a fretful letter from a creative’s mother” (p. 126). She also states,

I think there’s something profoundly mean-spirited about this dogged, postmortem quest to stigmatize people who bring such pleasure to the world. Since the shaky methodology produces nothing useful for science and little that enhances our appreciation of art, why do it? (p. 133)

Indeed, although Schlesinger notes that she “[doesn’t] understand the utility of the historiometric methods, which seems to reject the research tradition” (p. 128), she does not seem to present her own view of the creative person or of the appropriate methods to study it, though she does offer that she “believe[s] creativity should be celebrated, not diagnosed” (p. 13).

Although some may argue that the author is justifiably angry, others may find Schlesinger’s tone strident and combative. Indeed, with regard to her other published scholarship (Schlesinger, 2004), Gary Wills found her critique of Jamison and Ludwig to be “scathingly critical” (Wills, 2004, p. 184). Other scholars have also supported Ludwig’s
work. Simonton wrote on the book jacket of the Ludwig book: “Glory has its price as Dr. Ludwig reveals in his monumental study,” and Mark Runco, editor of Creativity Research Journal, added that he is “not exaggerating when I say that this book is required reading for anyone interested in the nature of creativity and greatness” (also on the Ludwig book jacket).

In sum, it seems imperative in this spirited debate to recall several points. First, psychologists and other creativity researchers must keep their eyes on the prize. If we cannot all just get along, we can at least focus on our common goal, understanding the relationship (or lack of relationship) between creativity and mental illness. The controversy has continued for years and is likely to continue for many more.

Second, when smart people disagree, often each party has something valuable to contribute. It is a fact that persons with severe and persistent mental illness have produced creative masterpieces. It is also a fact that persons with no mental illness have produced creative masterpieces. To be clear, the “mad genius” debate tends to begin when one poses questions concerning whether rates of mental illness(es) differ among certain creative persons versus the general population. Further debate ensues when one asks whether mental illness enhances or diminishes creativity, and in what (if any) way(s). Recall that one outcome (creativity) need not be associated with only one set of antecedents. Multiple pathways are possible, and, in the case of creativity, seem likely.

Third, an approach that considers and respects multiple research methods is likely to shed light on relevant issues. Various research methods have pros and cons. It would be incorrect to say an emic approach is right and the etic approach is wrong, or vice versa. It would be just as incorrect to say that nomothetic methods are right and idiographic ones are wrong, or vice versa. The same goes for qualitative and quantitative methods. At her best, Schlesinger offers valuable insights into research and theoretical issues surrounding the “mad genius” debate.

It is easier to tear something down than to build something up. Although far from perfected, historiometric and biographical methods, including psychological autopsies, offer a chance to explore important questions that may be difficult or impossible to investigate with other research tools. Interviews, when they are possible, have their place as well. Some may even argue that, when compared with alternative approaches, such as the use of personal communications, anecdotes, popular newsstand magazine/newspaper items, and selective literature reviews, work by Ludwig, Jamison, Andreasen, and Simonton shines all the brighter.

Psychological research is not the Potemkin village or house of cards built on sand that the present book often seems to suggest. However, frequently science does progress gradually, with emerging scholars standing on the shoulders of earlier researchers, and I suspect the jury is still out on the mad genius controversy.
References


